

Two Nineteenth Century Trade Routes in the Eastern Himalayas: the Bhutanese trade with Tibet and Bengal*

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From the early modern era, Bhutan had been carrying out regular caravan trade on the rugged Himalayan terrain with Bengal on the south and Tibet on the north. This is evident in the contemporary Bengali literature, which refers to several Bhutanese commodities, and also in the writings of foreign travellers. In 1626, a foreign traveller noted that Bhutan was “well provided with **Chinese** merchandise such as silk, gold and porcelain”¹¹, and those came through Tibet. According to an eighteenth century document, her annual trade was worth of Rs 200 thousand with Bengal and Rs 150 thousand with Tibet, including China.²² The trade continued, and perhaps flourished, during the nineteenth century. In this century, we are told of an annual event of Bhutan’s royal caravan going to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and also her trade with Rangpur, a business city of contemporary Bengal. The trade seems largely to be of a transit character since several export commodities - salt, gold, tea, pearls and corals, for example - were not of Bhutanese origin. Both Bengal and Tibetan goods could be noticed in either route along with Bhutanese commodities. The transit nature of this trade came in the limelight when the British administration in Bengal temporarily sealed the Bhutan border. It jeopardized the Bhutanese trade with Tibet and China since “in truth the

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¹ Deb, *Bhutan and India*, p.56.

² Gupta, *British Relations with Bhutan*, p.19.

Bhuteahs have nothing to give in exchange for the commodities of other countries.”³ It is highly probable, therefore, that the Tibetan and Chinese traders could be seen in the Bhutan-Bengal route, and the Bengali traders in the Bhutan-Tibet route. In fact, a sixteenth century merchant Ralph Fitch noted in his travelogue the movement of Chinese caravans in the Bhutan-Bengal trade route.

In this background, the present article seeks to identify the routes of trade between Bhutan on the one hand, and Tibet and Bengal, on the other. It discusses various travel characteristics in these routes, and describes their origins, destinations, nodes and links, as defined in an earlier article.⁴ Data and information available in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century reports of various British political missionaries like Bogle (1774), Turner (1783), Bose (1815), Griffiths (1837-38), Pemberton (1837-38) and Eden (1863-64) have been used. There are four parts in what follows. The first two parts concentrate on the details of the Bhutan-Tibet route and its travel characteristics, respectively. The following two parts deal with the similar descriptions of the Bhutan-Bengal route.

Part I

There were four alternative routes between Bhutan and Tibet that traders used at different periods: (1) Paro-Lhasa, (2) Punakha-Gyantse-Shigatse-Lhasa, (3) Bumthang-Lhasa, and (4) Tashigang-Lhasa. Though these routes had a common destination, viz. Lhasa, which happened to be the greatest

³ Eden, “Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64” in Kuloy (ed.), *Political Missions to Bootan*, p.129.

⁴ Ray and Sarkar, “Reconstructing of Nineteenth Century Trade Route between Bhutan and Assam: Evidences from British Political Missions”, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Volume 13, Winter, 2005, pp.4-7.

trade centre in Tibet, they had different origins, viz. Paro, Punakha, Bumthang and Trashigang. These origins assumed different levels of importance in Bhutan's domestic trade at different historical epochs, with their rises and falls being occasioned by frequent enmity and rivalry among their regional chieftains. There were, indeed, road linkages amongst them so that gradual diversion of trade from one centre to another was possible. All the routes were not, however, competitive. For instance, the Trashigang-Lhasa route was meant for Assam-bound traffic whereas the Paro-Lhasa route carried Tibetan traffic that were destined to Bengal. The present article takes up the Paro-Lhasa route in view of the availability of requisite data and information, and also the thrust area of this study that includes the Bhutan-Tibet route side by side the Bhutan-Bengal route.

Both in Bhutan and Tibet, the state was grossly involved in the country's external trade so that the benefit of trade went largely to the king, his nobles and other associates including the monasteries. On the Bhutanese trade Collister observed, "[A]ny trade in more valuable goods was entirely for the benefit of the Deb Raja and principal officers."⁵ In Tibet, they were, according to F. Grenard, the great nobles and monasteries "who together with the state were the only merchants on a large scale."⁶ Other similarities were also noticed in the ownership and execution of foreign trade in these countries. First, since the big merchants like the king or his nobles did not participate in the detailed execution of trade, they used to employ trade agents and professional persons to accompany the caravans. These people, therefore, got a share of trade benefits. Secondly, both countries allowed small merchants to carry out trade on their own. They traded mostly with their counterparts in the neighbour countries, but sometimes with their big merchants as well.

In the cross-border trade these small merchants disposed of

⁵ Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, p.21.

⁶ Grenard, *Tibet: The Country and its inhabitants*, p.286.

their wares in transit points with a view either to avoid the hazards in the forward trade, or in submission to the prevailing custom. The prevailing custom was that a particular group of merchants dominated a given stretch of the route. Thus, for example, the Bumthang merchants controlled the trade route from Bumthang to Lhasa while the merchants of Punakha controlled trade in between Gyantse and Shingatse, and monopolised trade up the valley of the river Mo Chu to Lingshi La.⁷ Lastly, although the major trade was carried out by the state in both countries, production was left entirely to private enterprises. Productive activities, basically primary in nature, were undertaken by farmers who sold their output in local markets to the state agents, the Lamas, the grandees and foreign traders. Traders had no large stake in production. Purchasing goods from local markets, they “fit out large caravans to carry it to places at several months” march.⁸

Although temperature during the winter dropped to the freezing point in the Himalayan kingdoms, it was by far the best season for caravan trade. The chance of rain was least; also the river beds were dry so that the caravans could smoothly proceed along those beds minimizing their toil and fatalities. Food was cheap, especially barley, meat and wine, and easily available in the route-side localities.⁹ Also, this was the season when farm activities were slack, and farmers had time to vend their crops and to opt for subsidiary jobs. In Tibet, for example, farmers in winter “proceeded to northern Tibet to lay in their stock of salt, obtained from the salt lakes that found there. Then these men start for Bhutan, Nepal or Sikkim, to sell their goods in those places.”¹⁰ Despite snow and frost in the route, therefore, “winter was the best season to travel to Lhasa”¹¹ for the purpose of trade. The average

⁷ Karan, *A Physical and Cultural Geography*, p.47.

⁸ Grenard, *Tibet: The Country and its inhabitants*, p.286.

⁹ Das, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, p.85.

¹⁰ Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet*, p.458.

¹¹ Das, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, p.85.

temperature was around 20 C in this season.

Caravans were led, human beings apart, by a host of animals like mules, ponies, horses, yaks, sheep etc. who could negotiate the narrow rugged paths in mountains. On the point of pack animals, however, differences were noticed between the Bhutanese and Tibetan caravans. Horses dominated the caravans of Tibet as those were low-cost animals there. Because of their cheapness, even the Tibetan farmers employed them for carrying loads from the field – a feature never found in Bhutan.¹² Bhutanese caravans, on the other hand, were dominated by human beings, especially the woman folk. Turner wrote, “The modes of conveyance here [in Tibet] for baggage are altogether different from the usage of the inhabitants of Bootan, where every thing, without exception, is loaded upon the shoulders of the people, and where, to their shame be it spoken, the women bear the heaviest share of so laborious an employment.”¹³ Similar was the opinion of Bogle. He reported, “The only way of transporting goods in this hilly country [Bhutan] is by coolies.”¹⁴ Unlike porters in the plain who carried loads on the head, Bhutanese porters fastened the burden upon their backs with a short stick in hand to support it at the time of rest. Even a girl of eighteen years of age could carry a weight of 70-75 pounds, and marched at 15-18 miles speed a day. This job was not, however, class-specific in the Bhutanese society. When caravans passed through a village, its dwellers were recruited at the behest of its headman, and were relieved at the next convenient village of recruitment. There was no market rate of wage for this unskilled job; the pleasure of the caravan-master was all what determined it. “This is a service so well established that the people submit to it without murmuring. Neither sex, nor youth, nor age exempt them

¹² Mehra, *Bhutan: Land of the Peaceful Dragon*, p.18.

¹³ Turner, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, p.208.

¹⁴ Ramphell, *Bhutan through the Ages*, vol. 2, p.148.

from it.”¹⁵

Both the Bhutanese and the Tibetans extensively used yaks in their caravans. Because of their heavy body weight and shorter legs, these animals could easily negotiate the rugged mountain passes against strong winds and water currents. They were also least selective in their diet, being satiated with whatever grass, soft or hard, was available wayside. The caravan-master was thus relieved of arranging fodder when yaks were in job. They evidently marched 9-10 miles a day in mountains and at about 16 miles on the plain though horses could run at double this speed.¹⁶ Caravans of sheep were, however, generally popular among the nomads in hills. Similar to other historical trade routes in the world, the traders in these Himalayan tracks preferred larger sized caravans presumably on account of the economies of scale and also out of fear from brigands. A source suggests that each caravan in these routes consisted at least of eight hundred animals and ninety men.¹⁷

Exports from Bhutan consisted of her domestic products like rice, woollen cloth, *munjeet* (a type of dye) and wrought iron, as well as imported products from Bengal such as English broad cloth, indigo, tobacco, coral, leather and sandal-wood. Since Tibet was sterile in grain crops, her people necessitated for their livelihood the import of rice, both boiled and parched, along with wheat and flour. While much of these imports were domestically consumed, some food grains were also re-exported “for the Chinese functionaries and officials”.¹⁸ Next to food came garments in importance, especially woollen products and broad cloths. These imported garments were fashionable only among the nobles, including the *lamas*, as the common people were to satisfy themselves with coarse woollen dresses and cloths woven domestically.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Grenard, *Tibet: The Country and its inhabitants*, p.289.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.287.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.295.

Imported woollen cloths found an additional extensive outlet in temple decorations. For their cotton garments, however, Tibetan women preferred the colour of white, in addition to light-blue and russet,¹⁹ and to sustain whiteness in cloths perhaps, the imported indigo was in great demand. For industrial purposes, again, Tibet imported wrought iron that was manufactured in Bhutan out of her own deposits of iron ore at Paro. This was used for the manufacture of small arms in an arsenal located at Dib near Che-Cho-Ling.²⁰

Bhutan's import from Tibet consisted of raw wool, musk, tea, silver, gold, embroidered silk piece-goods and rock salt. Some of these were domestically available in Tibet while others were Chinese in origin. Among the domestic products, gold was an important mineral that was deposited in the form of gold dust at Thokjalung and Chakchak in the Ngare province in western Tibet to some extent, and richly in its central provinces. It so abounded in the country that, according to Huc and Gabet, even "the common shepherds have become acquainted with the art of purifying these precious metals".²¹ Another important item was musk that hunters gathered from deer. Musk deer inhabited the forests in Kong-bo, Tsari and Lo where dwellers hunted them to barter for their daily necessities and ornaments. Although it had low market price in those places, especially at Lo, exorbitant transportation costs were involved because of high risk and danger from highway robbery—only "uncommonly adventurous [people] proceeded thither to get a supply from the natives".²² Tibetan rock salt was also an item of import in Bhutan which she largely re-exported to Bengal. Bengal had no other source than this though it had high demand on account of prevailing

¹⁹ Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet*, pp.452-453.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.447.

²¹ Referred in Colman Macaulay, 'Memorandum on our Relation with Tibet' in Sharma and Sharma, (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Tibet*, Vol. 2, *Travels and Memoirs of Tibet*, p.19. This part was taken from Report of Mission to Sikkim and the Tibetan Frontier, 1884.

²² Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet*, p.450.

socio-religious and medicinal practices. As noted above, these salts were extensively available in north Tibet. Last but not the least, Tibet was a bulk exporter of raw wool. Rearing of sheep was a household activity in Tibet that generated substantial raw wool. It was partly used domestically in the thriving woollen industry at Lhasa and its surrounding districts, and partly exported to neighbouring countries. About 1500 mule-packs of wool were annually exported to Bhutan in the late nineteenth century.²³

Part II

Paro: The Origin

Paro was historically developed as a fort town in a valley. The fort, locally called *dzong*, was constructed more than four centuries ago for the protection of cultivators and also to appoint government officials such as *penlops* and *dzongpons* to administer the country. Under the *dzong's* protection from wars, internal disorder and natural calamities, an extensive human settlement encompassing various economic activities and institutions, including markets, was developed within a periphery of quarter a mile from this *dzong*. There were long stretches of good arable land in the valley, especially at its lower elevations and in the plain, which afforded the cultivation of rice and wheat. Also, its hill contour, a few kilometres away, contained a significant quantity of iron that was extracted in a naïve way for the purpose of construction and industries. Local people separated iron from sandy soils by using a magnet, and heaped it for sale as iron dust.²⁴ In fact, a nearby hill was called *Chakolah*, 'Iron Mountain', because of its iron deposit. In the late nineteenth century,

²³ Ibid., p.448.

²⁴ Eden, "Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64" in Kuloy (ed.), *Political Missions to Bootan*, p.92.

there was an iron ore mine at a distance of two days' journey from Paro.

Owing to its location advantages, Paro emerged as an important trade centre in the eastern Himalayas. It was connected in the north with Phari, an important commercial town of Tibet,²⁵ and in the south with Rangpur in Bengal. While describing its locational advantage in the eastern Himalayan trade, Eden observed, "Paro from its situation should be one of the largest cities in the East; situated in a perfectly level plain, easy of access from the low country, only two easy marches by an excellent road from one of the chief marts in Thibet, it ought to be the entrepot of the trade of Thibet, Tartary, China, and India".²⁶ Because of these advantages, Paro's market was dotted with a large number of big depots containing various imported products like broad-cloth, cotton-goods, cutlery, rice, corals, tea, spices, kincobs, leather, and miscellaneous articles of European manufacture along with rock-salt, musk, gold-dust, borax, and silk.

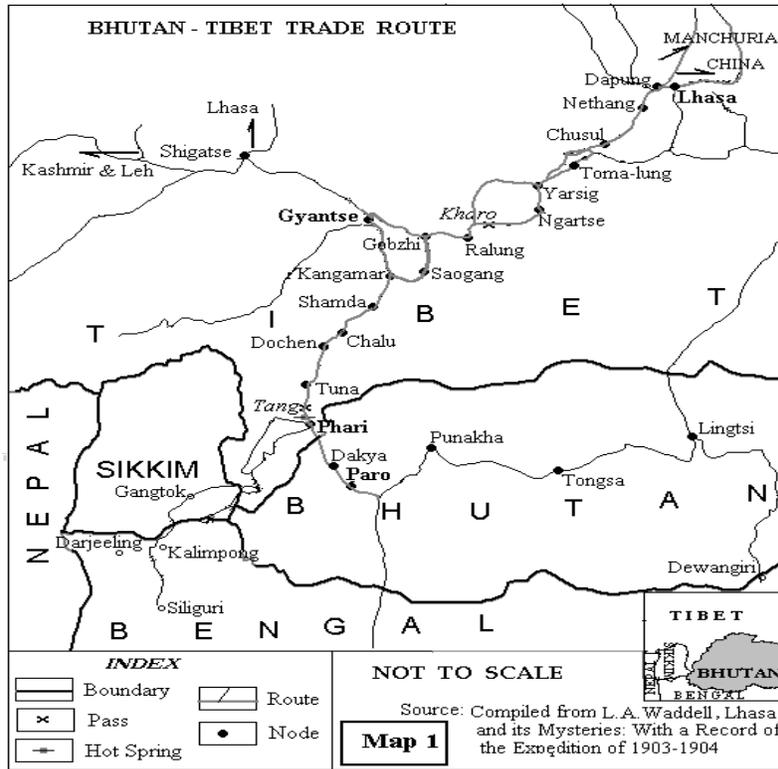
Lhasa: The Destination

Lhasa, the largest as well as the oldest city of Tibet, was set up in about AD 400 by King Srong-tsan-Gampo. The major domestic products such as gold, raw wool, woollen products, rock salt and musk that Lhasa exported, have already been discussed. Among other domestic products that found vent from this place were borax, drugs, ponies, brass utensils and incense sticks. Apart from these domestic goods, a variety of foreign goods were available in Lhasa because of her excellent linkages with two major countries in Asia, viz. India and China, and this ensured her as a unique destination for trade between Bhutan and Tibet. On the east, it was connected with China from primeval time. From this path went an extension westwards of Lhasa towards Kashmir and India

²⁵ Ibid., p.90.

²⁶ Ibid.,

providing it accessibility to those places. On the north east, it had a road link with China extending to Manchuria, and on the west with Leh, “the capital of the farthest outlying province of Kashmir-Ladak”.²⁷ Its southern border was connected with a number of places in Bhutan, that we have already noted, and also with Nepal and Sikkim.



Lhasa’s well-knitted road network with the Himalayan kingdoms generated two important characteristics for her trade. Firstly, a number of non-Tibetan merchants, especially Kashmiris, came to settle in Lhasa, and ran trading

²⁷ Holdich, *Tibet, The Mysterious*, p.44.

enterprises. Akin to the role of the Jews in European trade, the Kashmiris used to play a pivotal role in the east Himalayan trade over China, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Bengal.²⁸ Secondly, commodities from several countries adorned the markets of Lhasa giving it a cosmopolitan character. China provided it with tea, silk, carpet and porcelain articles, and Mongolia supplied it leather, saddlery, sheep and horses. Rice, sugar, musk and tobacco came from Bhutan and Sikkim, and broadcloth, indigo, brass-works, coral, pearls, sugar, spices and drugs from Nepal. Though a number of goods from Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim were made in India, Indian goods were also supplied there directly through Lhadak. In response to the demand from travelling traders in the city, however, a number of hotels and inns sprang up in Lhasa. On the fringe of its every market place one encountered a chain of eateries where various meats and flour predominated.²⁹ These eateries revealed the non-resident character of the trading community at Lhasa.

Nodes and Links

From Paro the first resting place for Tibet-bound caravans from Bhutan was 14 km away at Dakya Dzong (vide Map 1), a walled fort that was constructed to combat the Tibetan invasion. The intermediate road, moderately ascending, ran through a valley of pines, and met with scattered villages on the wayside, which thrived primarily on breeding *tangan* horses. Agriculture was only a subsidiary occupation there. The *dzong*, however, provided shelter to travelling traders along with their animals in stables. Taking night stay there, they proceeded along the valley towards a Tibetan border, the village Sana, on the same ascending road. Dwellers in this border mostly wove coarse woollens, again with agriculture as their subsidiary livelihood. There was a guard house there where a party of Booteah was stationed, who permit no one

²⁸ Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, p.21.

²⁹ Landon, *Lhasa: The Mysterious City, Vol. II*, pp.275-276.

to pass their frontier, without a passport from the Daeb [Deb Raja]'.³⁰

Crossing the border the journey gradually entered into a difficult phase with the road passing through a chain of snow-capped mountains and dense forests. These high inclines were favourite habitats of chowry-tailed cattle which the natives haunted to gather chowry to sell. For taking short rest in this tedious journey often did the travellers sit in cavities of the rocks that sprang naturally on the way. Such a natural shed was Gasa, which, as Turner noted, "served as a resting place for travellers passing to and fro."³¹ About 21 km march ahead this path led traders to Phari, the first node in Tibet. The land here was rocky so that cultivation was impossible. Only hunting and gathering were the means of livelihood. Chowry-tailed animal and musk deer were in plenty, and the local people earned on them. There was, however, a fortress in that place where travellers took night shelter. Alternatively, they could proceed five km farther to Chugya to rest at the Chasa Goompha where Phari Lama stayed. He was the most influential person among the herds, and also the governor of a vast range of rocks and deserts.

The next important commercial town in this route was Gyantse, 132 km from Chugya. Several villages stood on this way for the caravans to stay at night. Those were Tuna, Dochen, Chalu, Shamda, Kangamar, and Saogang with distances from each other varying in the range of 12-24 km. Most of them were insignificant hamlets at the lap of mountains. Only Kangmar and Saogang had some importance in the contemporary business. The former's importance was due to its strategic location as a junction of two paths, one proceeding directly to Lhasa and the other via Gyantse (vide Map 1). Since the former was a shorter path, the Lhasa-bound travellers preferred it in most cases. The

³⁰ Turner, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, p.183.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.193.

importance of Saogang was due to the existence of an old fort, and also a monastery, where traders could stay comfortably at night. The road in this stretch, however, ran mostly through valleys. Some of these valleys were extensive while others were narrow. They were cultivable somewhere but dry, rocky and totally unfit for cultivation elsewhere. Many springs and lakes came up on the way, and they were hot beds of superstition in the locality. People could read, for example, the evil design of the forthcoming events from the Lake Ramtchieu. Again, a hot spring in between Saogang and Kangamar was believed to cure all the diseases under the sky. Turner wrote, "The virtues attributed to this spring, were various and powerful, not being confined to invalids of any particular description, but extending to all the sick and aged, whether they seek a cure from infirmity or from disease."³² Whatever their superstitious values, there is no doubt that these springs and lakes provided much-needed water to the moving caravans along this route.

The caravan thus reached Gyantse, the 'dominating peak'. It was one of the earliest settlements in Tibet where goods from south Asia were exchanged with those from central Asia. It had road connections with India, Nepal and Bhutan on the one end, and Ladak and central Asia on the other. Caravans, therefore, regularly visited this place from Ladak, Nepal and upper Tibet with goods such as gold, borax, salt, wool, musk and furs for exchange with the central Asian commodities like tea, tobacco, sugar, cotton goods and hardware. Gyantse itself was a great producer of woollen cloth and carpets, and the third largest market for these products in Tibet. For the purpose of exchange, however, traders flocked in an open place at the entrance of a great pagoda. The Monastery levied taxes on the goods transacted there, and also on the buildings that surrounded the market accommodating various business activities. Some of the caravans coming from Bhutan terminated here while others progressed further.

³² Ibid., p.220.

The next three important nodes were Gobzhi, Ralung and Ngartse (vide Map 1). The distance between Gyantse and Gobzhi was about 24 km, and that between Gobzhi and Ralung about 21 km, both of which were covered in a day's march. For the longer distance between Ralung and Ngartse, viz. 30 km, the caravans often took a halt at Zara, 11 km from Ralung. Gobzhi in the Tibetan language, however, signifies 'the four doors'. The place, indeed, represented a gateway to four different routes, three important trade paths to Lhasa and a fourth of lesser significance³³, and these gave it a place of prominence in the contemporary trade. A fort stood there to protect the caravan. Trade apart, the settlement also thrived in agriculture with its surroundings cultivated extensively with barley, peas and mustards. Some medicinal plants, especially larkspur and aconite, were also gathered and processed here for export to India.³⁴ Ralung, the next node, was not, however, that much important from the viewpoint of trade. It was the headquarters of the Drukpa Sect of Buddhism that controlled all the monasteries and temples of Bhutan, as well as the Governor of Trongsa who was the temporal representative of the Dharma Raja, the spiritual head of Bhutan.³⁵ The caravan traders found it a convenient place for rest at night. Ngartse was also preferred for the sake of security and convenience that was ensured by an existing fort.

Four more nodes, however, followed at Yarsig, Toma-lung, Chusul and Nethang (vide Map 1). Their respective distances from one another were 17 km, 20 km, 11 km and 32 km. Of these, Yarsig and Chusul were more important from the viewpoint of trade. Yarsig was significant as it was directly linked to Shigatse, a commercial town of Tibet. Some Bhutanese caravans visited Shigatse instead of Lhasa, and also some Bhutan-bound trades were originated there. Chusul was comparatively a larger human settlement where

³³ Waddel, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, p.280.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.281.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-284.

houses were built of stones. It housed two forts, one of which was the old castle of Chusul. Waddel remarked, "These two forts had evidently been of enormous strength, and this marvelously strong natural position ...[commanded] effectually the trade routes from India, Nepal, Bhutan and Shigatse to Lhasa."³⁶ Nethang was, however, historically a religious place where a number of monasteries and shrines were situated. Of the two remarkable shrines in this place, one was attributed to the King Ralpachan, who ruled during the ninth century A.D., and the other was the tomb of Atisha, the great Buddhist monk from India who migrated to Tibet in 1038 A.D., and reformed Lamaism.

Similar to the previous stretch, the road ran here mostly through disjointed valleys along the rivers that endowed them. While the journey through the valleys was smooth, it became difficult at the confluences of valleys, which were often occupied by the passes or hills. Such a difficult journey confronted a nine-km path on a mountain between Gobzhi and Ralung. Waddel noted that more often than not goods fell from pack animals in this steep road, and "the falling of any load delayed the whole of the column behind it".³⁷ Similar challenges were encountered along the Kharo pass between Ralung and Ngartse, and along the Kamba pass between Ngartse and Toma-lung. There was another three-km stretch away from Chusul where the road ran beneath overhanging granite cliffs. So accident-prone was this stretch that on a stone the people engraved their goddess of mercy, the Tara, "who guards the traveller from the dangers of the falling rocks, and of the seething waters below his path".³⁸

From Nethang travellers were to go for 21 km to reach Lhasa. The journey continued to be risk-prone, and became still more hazardous as the road advanced through undulating terrains of mountains. On this difficult leg was engraved,

³⁶ Ibid., p.317.

³⁷ Ibid., p.282.

³⁸ Ibid., p.316.

perhaps for the sake of eternal blessings, a massive rock-sculpture of sitting Buddha facing Lhasa. Only two km ahead of the destination the road finally entered a fertile valley with all evidences of advanced cultivation. The journey became relaxed passing by the side of scattered villages, monasteries as well as wild flowering plants that were much to the resemblance of European wildflowers.

Part III

The Bhutan-Bengal trade route claims antiquity on the strength of evidence from the seventeenth century foreign traveller Ralph Fitch. It came to further limelight and got the state patronage in Bengal during the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries because of the colonial government that looked after the trading interests of British goods in general and that of the English East India Company in particular. The route's importance to the British administration was not due to their interest in Bhutan *per se*, but in Tibet and China, which were accessible from Bhutan. Earlier, India used to carry out substantial trade with Tibet and China via Nepal, a connection that was lost in 1768 when King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Nepal reserved the right to trade in this route only to the Gurkhas. The East India Company then sought a vent for their Tibetan and Chinese trade through Bhutan. Though the Bhutan-Bengal trade route was thus primarily intended for a wider trade network encompassing Tibet and China, it did boost up the exchange of goods between Bhutan and Bengal.

Bengal government patronage of Bhutanese trade in Bengal took place in various ways. In the first place, Bhutanese traders had attracted earlier a duty of Rs 2000 at Rangpur³⁹, which was the largest destiny for Bhutanese commodities in Bengal. They were subsequently exempted from that duty. Warren Hastings, the Governor-general of India, personally took initiative in this regard. In a letter to the Collector of

³⁹ Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records, Rangpur, Vol.I*, p.70

Rangpur, he stressed, “Having determined to abolish all duties on the Bootea trade to Rangpur, either on the sales or purchase of their horses or other merchandise, we desire that you will carry this resolution into execution”.⁴⁰ Secondly, the government reimbursed the expenses of the caravans coming from Bhutan, and also those relating to the construction of stables in Rangpur.⁴¹ Thirdly, there had earlier been a ban on the purchase of oil and dried fish in Rangpur by Bhutanese merchants. On the complaints received from them, Warren Hastings removed all those bans. He instructed, “[T]he district official should] issue Perwannahs to the Zeminders and officers of the districts in which the Booteas have been accustomed to buy these articles, to protect and assist them in carrying on their trade and to allow their oil and dried fish freely to pass the different chokeys and gauts.”⁴² Fourthly, the government extended civic facilities to the Bhutanese and Tibetan traders who visited Calcutta every year in winter to sell their wares. A Buddhist temple was also constructed near Calcutta, which they could use as a meeting place, a place of night halt as well as for the purpose of prayer.⁴³

These policies were evidently based on the proposal of George Bogle. Bogle believed that the duty on the sale of Bhutanese horses should be removed in exchange of some benevolent measures from the end of the Bhutan government. He advised, “The Bhutanese should be free to sell their horses anywhere in Bengal free from any duty or any other hindrance...and that in return the Deb should allow all Hindu and Mussalman merchants freely to pass and repass through his country between Bengal and Tibet.”⁴⁴ Bogle was aware that the Deb Raja had been stubbornly resisting the entry of

⁴⁰ Quoted in Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records, Rangpur, Vol.I*, p.70.

⁴¹ Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.77.

⁴² Quoted in Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records, Rangpur, Vol. II*, p.5.

⁴³ Deb, *Bhutan and India*, p.138.

⁴⁴ Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, p.21.

European traders in Bhutan. If the Bengalis were allowed to trade there and use it as a transit point in the Tibetan trade, the interests of English broadcloth and other products would be promoted. Moreover, he pointed out, “[T]he Company may be greatly benefited in the sale of broadcloth, iron and lead and other European commodities by sending proper persons to reside at Rungpore to explore the interest...of Bhutan...”⁴⁵ The marketing interest of British commodities, especially broadcloth and iron, thus underpinned the British policy towards Bengal’s trade with Bhutan.

There were eleven entry points, locally called *duars*, between erstwhile Bengal and Bhutan. Out of these, five *duars* belonged to the district of Jalpaiguri in Bengal and six to the district of Goalpara in Assam during the nineteenth century. The *duars* with Bengal were Lakhimpur, Kumargram, Balla, Chamurchi and Buxa. The caravans from Bhutan travelled mostly through the *duars* Kumargram, Chamurchi and Buxa because of the lack of penetrability at Lakhimpur and Balla. There was, however, a controversy regarding the popularity of Buxa vis-a-vis Chamurchi as a *duar* to Bhutan. Pemberton believed that traders disliked Buxa because of its steep, narrow and uneven paths, which were fatal even to pack animals. According to him, “It appears that the merchants who convey their goods from Tibet and Bootan to the town of Rungpore in the plains, all travel from the northern frontier of the latter country through the districts subject to the Paro Pilo...and instead of crossing, as was generally supposed, to the left bank of the Tchinchoo, near the confluence of that river with the Hatchoo, continue to travel along the right bank, by a route which leads to a village called Doona, between Dalimkotta and Cheemurchee. It is described, as infinitely more easy of access than the road by Buxa Doar...”⁴⁶ Turner, however, did not agree with him. He believed that the journey of caravans that used the Buxa *duar* involved lower costs. Other authorities also confirmed the

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.8.

⁴⁶ Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.48.

preference of the Buxa *duar* among travelling traders. The *duar* at Kumargram was, however, important because of its connection with Kalikhola, a big trade centre in Bhutan that was situated at a tri-junction between Bengal, Assam and Bhutan.

Although the Bhutan-Assam trade route was conspicuous by the absence of traders from the plain, Bengali traders frequently travelled in the Bhutan-Bengal route side by side with hill traders like the Bhutanese and the Tibetans. George Bogle vouched this in a letter to the Governor-general of India in 1774.⁴⁷ A contemporary Bengali pilgrim also confirmed the presence of plain traders in this hilly route. He noted, "Many Bengal merchants had made their way through Bhutan to Tibet."⁴⁸ Moreover, available evidence confirms that traders from the plains were not discouraged by authorities either in Bhutan or in Tibet. According to a source, "Many merchants had...brought their commodities to market...The authorities were most heartily disposed to continue the commercial intercourse. There were no complaints of impediment or loss."⁴⁹ This was a significant development in the nineteenth century in view of the earlier attitude of the Deb Raja to exclude traders from the plain in this route.

Similar to other trade routes in this region, the Bhutan-Bengal route became active and vibrant only in the winter season. According to the Collector of Rangpur, "The Bootan caravans generally arrive at Rungpoor in February and March, and return to their country in May and June."⁵⁰ Note that the monsoon arrived in the sub-Himalayan Bengal around early June so that the caravans from Bhutan scheduled their departure from this place prior to its onset.

⁴⁷ Markham, *Narrative of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, p.53.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, p.23.

⁴⁹ Gupta, *British Relations with Bhutan*, p.54.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.77.

The beasts of burden in this route were similar to those in the Bhutan-Assam trade route.⁵¹ Cart was, however, never used here for transportation presumably because of its risk and inconvenience in an inclined road. Rather, the practice was to suspend goods on both sides of the animals through a connector of jute ropes, called *taat*. The people accompanying those beasts were called *bolodia*.⁵²

From a contemporary source, Pemberton prepared a list of Bhutan's import and export from Bengal. It appears from the list that the principal export items included *tangun*, *munjistha*, blankets, cow-tails, wax, musk, walnuts, lac, China silk, and silver. *Tangun* was by far the most significant item. An estimated number of 400-500 *tanguns* were annually sold in Bengal and fetched about Rs 30,000-40,000.⁵³ *Munjistha*, a dye material, came next in importance with its annual value of trade standing at Rs 7000.⁵⁴ It was extensively used in Bengal's cotton textile industry. Other important items were blankets and cow-tails amounting in value to Rs 2580 and Rs 550 per annum respectively.⁵⁵ Bhutan's import from Bengal included chiefly broadcloth, indigo, goat skins, and copper. There were also imports of endy cloth, coarse cloth, googol, sandal wood, country gunpowder, dried fish, tobacco, betel-nut, cloves, nutmegs, cardamom, nukher, camphor and sugar. It is noteworthy that Bhutan's trade balance with Rangpur ran a deficit in most years with import exceeding export.

⁵¹ Ray and Sarkar, "Reconstructing of Nineteenth Century Trade Route between Bhutan and Assam: Evidences from British Political Missions", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Volume 13, Winter, 2005, pp.9-10.

⁵² Barman, *Uttar Banglar Sekal o Amar Jiban Smiriti*, p.11.

⁵³ Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records, Rangpur, Vol.I*, p.46.

⁵⁴ Martin, *Eastern Bengal, Vol V, Rangpur and Assam*, p.710.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.710-711.

Part IV

Paro was the origin of the Bhutan-Bengal trade route. Since we have already described the place in detail in Section II we avoid its repetition here. The destination of this route, and its nodes and links are discussed below.

Rangpur: The Destination

Rangpur gained eminence as a destination of hill traffic on the strength of its transport linkage with important commercial towns and cities in the country. Its transportation was entirely river-borne. The river Tista on the bank of which the town was situated was linked with the Brahmaputra on the west and the Mahananda on the east. The Mahananda in turn flows into the Ganges. Rangpur was thus endowed with the transportation facilities of the two great rivers of Eastern India, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Because of these linkages Rangpur emerged as a centre of exchange between the hill products coming from Bhutan and Tibet, on the one hand, and the products available in eastern India, on the other.

The principal commodities that the Bhutanese traders purchased from Rangpur were broadcloth and indigo. The imported English broadcloths in Calcutta were made available in plenty in Rangpur so that the hill markets in Bhutan and Tibet for English products could be explored from Rangpur. In fact, this was the business strategy of the East India Company, which they nurtured by posting their agents at Rangpur. The other product of significance, viz. indigo, was manufactured in Rangpur itself. About 13,000 acres of land were annually put into cultivation in this district during the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁶ While the big manufacturers sent their output directly to Calcutta, the smaller ones sold their products to the local user-industry and the Bhutanese

⁵⁶ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, p.246.

traders. The Bhutanese demand for this commodity may be assessed from the fact that when the Rangpur fair was discontinued in 1832, about 1000 maunds of indigo were to be brought from Rangpur to Jalpaiguri mainly for sale to Bhutanese traders.⁵⁷

The exchange of goods from the hills took place in fairs that sprang up at different places in this region. Those fairs were generally held in winter and continued roughly for four weeks. The biggest one took place at Darwani where, according to a contemporary source, around 50,000 visitors participated. In addition to the traditional products, various live animals like elephants, camel, sheep etc were sold here from the neighbouring states like Bihar. Similar fairs were also held at Panga, Barabhita, Badarganj, Birat and Rangpur. The Rangpur fair was, however, sponsored by the government, who provided the entire organisational expenditures. Bogle started this fair in 1780. There were no state interventions or intervention of any local bodies in the affairs of these fairs. Bhutanese merchants were, as Bogle remarked in 1780, “left to the freedom of their own will in buying and selling, [and] went away very well satisfied”.⁵⁸

Nodes and Links

From Paro, Bengal-bound caravans descended along the banks of the river Pa-chu in the south-east direction, and took a halt 16 km away at Paku, which was situated at the confluence of the Pa-chu and Ma-chu. On the wayside valley of the river grew a few prosperous villages where inhabitants were mostly the arm-guards and officials of the Paro fort.⁵⁹ Sometimes, the caravans halted at the village Essana, close to Paku, which was basically an agrarian settlement. Paku had

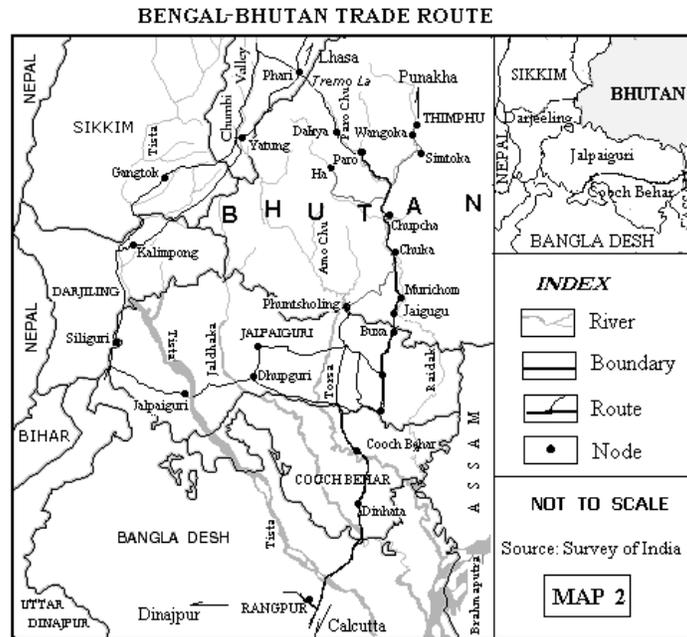
⁵⁷ Ibid.,

⁵⁸ Quoted in Deb, *Bhutan and India*, p.cliii.

⁵⁹ Eden, “Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64” in Kuloy (ed.), *Political Missions to Bootan*, p.91.

its importance in the contemporary business network because of its road linkage in addition to the present one, with Tassisudon (presently called Thimpu), the capital of Bhutan (vide Map 2). From Paku, however, the caravans changed their direction, and proceeded southward towards the border of Bengal.

The first place of commercial interest in this route was Buxa, a place on the Cooch Begar-Bhutan border around 110 km from Paku.



In between Paku and Buxa there were several villages where caravans might halt at night. More prominent among such villages were Chupcha, Chukha, Murichom and Jaigugu (vide Map 2) with successive distances at 27 km, 28 km, 20 km and 19 km. Travelling traders preferred Chupcha and

Chukha for the existence of castles there where they felt safe at night. Murichom and Jaigugu were, however, prosperous agricultural settlements, and traders could rest there at night along with their pack animals. The road in this stretch ran through the slopes of mountains and narrow valleys along the river-bed. Some mountains were almost barren while others were cultivated on the *jhum* technology. The importance of this stretch of the route is understood from the existence of an iron suspension bridge over the river Teemboo in between Chukha and Murichom. It was 147 ft in length and 6 ft in breadth, and could be raised vertically up to about seven feet.

Every caravan, however, took a halt at the commercial hubs of Buxa. It was situated at the base of several mountains, and spacious enough to accommodate a great body of human settlement. Turner described it as “a place of great natural strength”. He continued, “[B]eing a frontier station of these mountains, [it] has been rendered still stronger by the aid of art, which has been most ingeniously employed to strike off the summit of the hill, and to level an extensive space, capable of affording accommodation to a body of men, sufficiently numerous for the defence of this difficult pass, against all assault”.⁶⁰ Because of the importance of this place as the entry point of their trading world, Bhutanese traders performed various rituals at Buxa. One such ritual was to cut off the tails of their horses. Obviously, it disfigured the appearance of *tangans*, and accordingly, depreciated their market value. The British government in Bengal, however, persuaded them to abolish the custom by providing liberal rewards. There was a hearsay that for this liberal reward of the government the place was referred as the ‘bounteous pass’ or the *Buxa duar*.⁶¹

The next important commercial town in this route was Cooch Behar, around 48 km away from Buxa. Unable to cover up

⁶⁰ Turner, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, pp, 39-40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.40.

this distance in a day, the caravans used to take breaks at Minagoung and Chichakotta villages that stood on the way between Buxa and Cooch Behar. While Chichakotta housed a fort that attracted the travellers to stay at night, Minagoung was preferred as a halting place by the Bhutanese caravans as well as Buxa-bound traders from the plain. In this stretch from Buxa to Cooch Behar, however, the hilly terrain got flatter and plain. But the slope declined so gently that, as Griffith described, “the boundaries of the Hills and those of the Plains were but ill-defined”.⁶² Consequently, the journey in this segment was smooth and comfortable in contrast to the hazards of the previous legs. The connecting road sometimes ran through the heart of dense foothill forests, sometimes over grass land, and occasionally by the side of wild pineapple orchards. In the season, pineapples were available here in plenty, and Turner reported that “no less than twenty may be bought for a rupee, about the value of half a crown”.⁶³

Many traders from Bhutan terminated their journey at Cooch Behar, disposing their wares there. It was a commercial centre that developed from the sixteenth century onwards as a centre of exchange among various traders from Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim and India. In addition to various agricultural products that grew in and around Cooch Behar, several merchandises from Patna, Rajmahal and Gaur⁶⁴ were also for sale to the Bhutanese traders. Hunter noted, “The Bhutia trade with Bengal was carried on formerly, as now, through territory occupied by Koch chiefs; and when a party of Bhutias arrived in Kuch Behar, it was customary that they should be maintained at public expense.”⁶⁵ This explains the importance of Bhutanese traders in the commerce of Cooch

⁶² Griffiths, “Journal of the Missions to Bootan in 1837-38”, in Kuloy (ed.), *Political Missions to Bootan*, p.302.

⁶³ Turner, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, pp, 13-14.

⁶⁴ Deb, *Bhutan and India*, p.55.

⁶⁵ Hunter, *Statistical Account of The State of Kuch Behar*, pp.412-413

Behar.

The last leg of the journey was from Cooch Behar to Rangpur, and that covered a distance of approximately 82 km. Since this was an extensive human settlement, the caravans did not find any difficulty to find their places of rest at night. Often did they stay at places like Ghiddildow, Pahargange, Badaldanga, Mangalhaut, Saftabarry and Calamatty. Most of these were agrarian villages. Only Mangalhaut was a large manufacturing town that stood at the border of Rangpur and Cooch Behar. Excepting innumerable rivers that the caravans were to cross, there was no hazard in this journey.

V

The trade routes between Bhutan and Tibet and Bengal that this study elaborates were thus very active during the nineteenth century. The Bhutan-Tibet trade route that ran about 410 km from Paro to Lhasa belonged largely to the territory of Tibet with Bhutan accounting for only one eighth part of this stretch and three links out of 26 total links as identified in this study. It was thoroughly a mountain route posing various hazards and threats to travelling traders. That was why the speed of caravans here was as low as less than 16 km a day on the average. There were, however, three other contemporary trade routes between Bhutan and Tibet, which originated from different places of Bhutan but were all destined to Lhasa. All these trade routes treaded through mountain passes and river valleys. The route under study contained four such passes, viz. Tremo, Tang, Kharo and Kampa, with the Kharo pass at the top in terms of elevation. In contrast to the Bhutan-Tibet trade route, the Bhutan-Bengal trade route belonged mostly to the plain land. Only a part of its 268-km long stretch from Paro to Rangpur had alternating inclinations of hilly terrain. Gently climbing down from the mountain, it passed amidst century-old human settlements in the plain. Expectedly, the average speed of caravans in this route was higher, about 21 km per day.

These trade routes assumed importance because of the presence of Bengali traders along with the Tibetans and the Bhutanese. The travelling of Bengali traders along these routes contributed significantly to the exchange of knowledge and culture between these Himalayan kingdoms and India. A scrutiny of traded commodities in these routes, however, indicates that Bhutan acted as a transit trade point between these two large countries.

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