

## Reconstructing Nineteenth Century Trade Route between Bhutan and Assam: Evidences from British Political Missions\*

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Recent studies contradict a longheld western perception that Bhutan was a landlocked and isolated kingdom until the recent times without any significant trade relation with the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> They have dug the contemporary documents to prove her vibrant trade with the neighbours at least from the seventeenth century onwards. Side by side with the present jurisdiction of West Bengal, the kingdom carried out trade with Assam in those days. The extent of her historical interconnection with Assam is understood from the evidence of seven duars (doors)<sup>2</sup> between these two places. All those duars were not, however, safe for long-distance traffic. The problem of dense forest stood on their ways, and it was compounded by the settlement of robbers and other anti-social people in their vicinities.<sup>3</sup> Safety was ensured only in the Banska duar through which ran, as the evidence in this study suggests, a long-distance trade route between Bhutan and Assam. The present article seeks to identify that trade route, and to analyse its various facets. The route has not yet been studied in any detail presumably because of inadequate source materials. We seek to reconstruct it based on the data and information from the reports of two British political

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\* We acknowledge Dr. D.P.Boot, Cartographer, Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University for the preparation of maps in this study, and also for his valuable comments. All errors, however, remain with the authors.

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missions, headed respectively by William Griffith<sup>4</sup> and Robert Boileau Pemberton,<sup>5</sup> during the first half of the nineteenth century. Those are supplemented, wherever necessary as well as feasible, by other source materials.

Section I describes the historiography of trade route in a nutshell along with the scope of investigation in this study. Section II defines certain concepts that are involved in the trade route study. Section III identifies the trade route between Bhutan and Assam, and elaborates its various characteristics. Major findings of the study are summarised by way of conclusion in Section IV.

### **Section I: Historiography and the scope of study**

Although trade routes played an important role in human civilisation, it seems to have attracted less attention in the literature than what it deserves. A 20-million strong records at the Library of Congress database accommodate only 134 titles on Trade Routes.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, only 264 trade thoroughfares are referred in Melvyl database of the University of California. Most of these trade routes belong to what is popularly known as the Silk Roads.

The literature on the trade route dates back to the late nineteenth century when the imperial conflict between Great Britain and Russia in Asia generated a good amount of academic interest on the ancient silk route. Since then, the subject has been enriched so much so that it is now an integral part of the historiography in Asia. A review of this literature is available in Drege and Buhner,<sup>7</sup> and Morris Rossabi.<sup>8</sup> The existing literature, however, draws materials mainly from two distinct sources, literal sources and archaeological findings. While the earlier studies are based on the former sources,<sup>9</sup> the latter has gained popularity after the excavation at Xinjiang during the early twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The present study draws exclusively from the literal sources, especially from books and journals as well as the reports of political missions visiting Bhutan from British India.

The two branches of literature, mentioned above, perceive the function of trade routes from divergent plains. Since the literate sources recognise only the literate communities, the trade routes in such studies inevitably highlight 'trans-civilisation' exchanges. Archaeological evidence, on the other hand, is able to acknowledge additionally the activities of non-literate communities, and, hence, focuses on 'trans-ecological' exchanges along the silk roads between the people in pastoral settlements and the nomads in the steppes. A synthesis has, however, been on the offing with the study on the Eurasian steppe route by Franck and Brownstone.<sup>11</sup> P. D. Curtain underscores the importance of such studies by emphasising, "Goods normally pass across this ecological divide with greater intensity than they do in more homogeneous environment."<sup>12</sup> David Christian, however, seeks to establish the trans-ecological exchange links along the silk roads by way of analysing the nature of the goods traded there.<sup>13</sup> Analysing the list of trade-wares published by al-Muqaddasi in 985 AD, he argued, "Any list of goods traded along the Silk Roads will show the presence of large amounts of steppeland or woodland products, while some of the goods produced in the agrarian world were made especially for export to the steppes."<sup>14</sup> Recognising the importance of such studies, the present article seeks to analyse the commodity composition in Bhutan's trade routes to ascertain the nature of exchange they represented.

Geography and history are the centrality of the historiography of the silk roads. Various cities and towns located on them are identified in the literature to analyse the role played by trade routes in the exchanges of commodities, technologies, styles, religions,<sup>15</sup> genes and disease vectors.<sup>16</sup> In the historical perspective, the literature narrates how the trade routes emerged and flourished as a result of several large agrarian empires like the Han, Roman, Parthian and the Kusan,<sup>17</sup> and subsequently waned with the rising importance of the sea-routes.<sup>18</sup> While the historical aspects of Bhutan's trade routes are kept outside the purview, the present study concentrates mainly on their geographical outlines.

The literature also attempts to develop the silk-road 'theory'. Pioneers in this field are A.G.Frank,<sup>19</sup> B.K.Gills,<sup>20</sup> J.L.Abu-Lughod<sup>21</sup>, W.G.McNeill<sup>22</sup> and others. The central hypothesis of this group of writers is available in Marshal Hodgson.<sup>23</sup> He notes, "Just as the first urban, literate life would have been impossible without the accumulation among a great many peoples of innumerable social habits and inventions, major and minor, so the great modern cultural mutation presupposed the contributions of all several citted peoples of the eastern hemisphere."<sup>24</sup> Frank and Gills, in particular, seek to establish an underlying unity of the Eurasian history, which they believe to have nurtured a single world system from 2000 BC onwards.<sup>25</sup> In a similar tone, Haraprasad Ray<sup>26</sup> underscores the unity of trans-Himalayan civilisation, and its integration with the world system through the southern silk roads where Bhutan's trade route was connected. The present study does not, however, enter into this field of interest.

## **Section II: Definitions**

The trade route literature does not formally define certain frequently used concepts. The terms like nodes, links, paths, route etc are loosely defined, and often used interchangeably. For the sake of clarity, we define certain terms to be used in this study borrowing from the literature of transportation network modelling that has been growing fast over the past few decades.<sup>27</sup> There is, in fact, a conceptual identity between these two fields. Similar to a transportation network, a trade route is loosely defined as a specific configuration of certain links connecting a given set of origin (O) and destination (D). Two differences are, however, noted. First, trade route usually refers to an extensive coverage between origin and destination across the country boundaries, often across the boundaries of the continents, which developed historically over a long period. The transportation network is, on the other hand, confined to a metropolis, or at best a conglomeration of villages and a city. Secondly, trade routes were developed with a single objective of the flow of trade (though used subsequently for a variety of purposes) whereas the

transportation network is constructed for various purposes like journey to work-place, journey to residence, shopping and so on. In this sense, trade route may be considered as a variety of transportation network. We use the following terminology in this study.

**Origin and Destination:** Origin is defined as an important place like a town or a city where commodities were assembled for long distance trade. It might not be the place of production, as understood in the present-day literature of transportation network. In earlier days, the commodities that were exported in bulk, were produced scatteredly in tiny scales in the countrysides, and assembled by traders in a transit point. That transit point is considered here as the origin. Destination is likewise defined as a town or a city where the merchandise was finally sold in bulk. It might not represent the zone of consumption. The consumers might live away from the place where the long-distance trade was terminated. The word 'finally' has been incorporated in the definition to accommodate the possibility of changing hands in transit.

**Node:** In transportation network, a link is defined as a transport infrastructure that connects two nodes. Thus, nodes are functionally conceived to define the link.

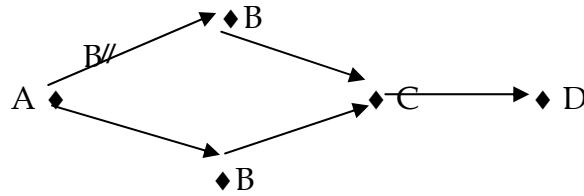


Figure 1

In the above figure, A, B, C and D are the nodes and AB, BC and CD are links. If a node is changed, a different link

follows. Thus, once the node is shifted from B to B', the link is also altered. But any place that comes in between two nodes, such as B'', in the same link is not considered as a node in the transportation literature since it can not perform the function ascribed to its concept. A node is, however, defined here as a place in the trade route that assumed importance in the past owing to the infrastructure supports it provided to traders such as marketing facilities, convenience and safety for taking rest, availability of food and drinks for the traders as also fodder for pack animals and so on. Thus, a place like B'' that comes in between two nodes A and B may be considered a node in our study if it provided nodal services to the traders.

**Link:** A transport infrastructure that connected two nodes is defined as a link. Under the above definition of nodes, the direction of journey did not necessarily change even if a journey shifted from one link to another.

**Path:** Path is defined as a set of links that connected a given set of origin and destination. There may be more than one path for a given O-D. Thus, for the origin (M) and destination (N), there may be two paths, such as MabN and McN in Figure 2.

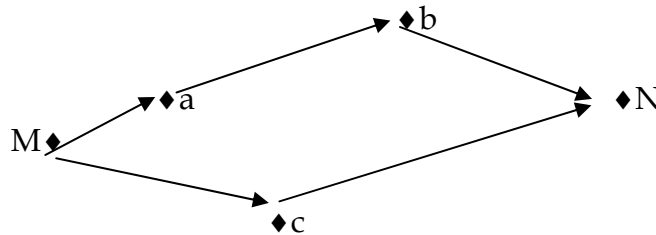


Figure 2

**Trade Route:** We are now in a position to formally define a trade route. Trade route is a historically evolved network of various paths  $k$ ,  $k \in K$ , for a given pair of origin and

destination, each path consisting of a number of links  $a$ ,  $a \in A$ , and each link interconnecting two nodes,  $n_i$  and  $n_j$ ,  $n_i, n_j \in N$ . This definition corresponds to that of transport network. That there were a number of paths in the silk roads is recognised in the literature. The German geographer, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), who coined the term 'silk roads', used it in plural form.<sup>28</sup> "The plural form", according to Christina, "is important because the Silk Roads consisted of a constantly shifting network of pathways..."<sup>29</sup> He further noted, "[I]t is possible to trace in the writing sources several arterial routes [paths, in our terminology] leading from China to the west. They passed through modern Xinjiang (by at least three major routes), through central Asia, and then either through Afghanistan to Kashmir and northern India, or to the Mediterranean..."<sup>30</sup> The distinction between links and paths in the definition of trade route is, therefore, important for the sake of clarity in the literature.

Since a trade route is, according to the above definition, constituted primarily of paths, links and nodes, the description of a trade route is an account of these constituents as well as their analysis from the viewpoints of the logistic supports that they provide to the trade.

### **Section III: The Trade Route**

Traffic in the Bhutan-Assam trade route accommodates traders of two different origins. There were the Bhutanese traders who travelled down to Assam for the disposal of Bhutanese goods, and treaded back with the Assamese ware to count profit in both ways. The people of Assam were not interested in this journey.<sup>31</sup> The uncomfortable terrain and climate in the hills might have prevented them from such ventures. Secondly, the Tibetans used this route as a path in the Tibet-Assam trade route, a broader network that formed an important leg of the southern 'silk roads'.<sup>32</sup> There was, however, another path in the Tibet-Assam route that bypassed Bhutan. It ran via Tawang, a place directly controlled from Lhasa, to Hajo in Assam through the Kooreah parrah duar.<sup>33</sup> Originating from Tawang a road, however, traversed to

Tashigang in Bhutan to serve as a link between the two paths of the Tibet-Assam route. These inner-connectivities with Tibet explained why the Tibetan traders, the Kumpas,<sup>34</sup> dominated traffic in the Bhutan-Assam route. It should be noted that the Kumpas were so predominant in this route that some authorities considered as the Kumpas even those Bhutanese who lived in tents or in temporary booths, and were employed in the carrying trade down this passage.<sup>35</sup> While going to Bhutan under a political mission, Pemberton noticed several caravans of the Kumpas proceeding towards Assam. The missionary counted as many as 400 Kumpas in a single stretch of the route.<sup>36</sup> According to his estimate, more than 2,000 kumpas were regularly involved in this trade route.

This traffic was not perennial in nature since the bulk of the Assam-bound commodities were traded through seasonal fairs.<sup>37</sup> Though, in most instances, the fairs in Assam were symbolic to some religious festivity, those were by and large the spots of commerce. Assam's annual fair, however, took place generally in the winter, and this timing was convenient for journey in the Bhutan-Assam trade route. Roads were least hazardous during this season. Numerous hilly streams and torrents criss-crossed the route putting challenges to journey during the monsoon. But in winter, they were tame and could be crossed by traders and their animals in safe along with their trade-wares. Many of them even got dried so that traders walked along their beds comfortably rather than going up and down through the uneven terrain of the mountain. The weather in winter was also conducive for journey in this region. This factor should be appreciated in view of heavy rainfall in the places en route the journey. The average rainfall was 254 cm in the hills and 178 cm in the plain during the rainy season<sup>38</sup> that extended over seven months from March onwards.<sup>39</sup> The travellers should, therefore, complete their journey before the monsoon set in. In his tour-diary Pemberton wrote, "They [the Kumpas] return homewards during the months of February and March, taking care to leave plains before the return of the hot weathers or



rains, of both of which they entertain the most serious apprehensions.”<sup>40</sup>

Pack animals were the only means of transport in this mountainous route. Ponies and mules were employed more frequently for the purpose. Bhutan breed the best pony, namely the Bhutia Tangun breed,<sup>41</sup> in the early nineteenth century, and those were evidently in great demand even in the plains of Bengal. Traders preferred this animal as they could easily negotiate the rugged terrain of the route, seeking assistance only in steep ascents and descents. Griffiths noted that the Bhutanese ponies were spirited, and understood their duties perfectly. In the line of the march, they proceeded orderly especially when the road was uneasy. They could march in such roads at a speed of about 2.5-3.2 km per hour. “In difficult ascents”, he observed, “they are assisted by pushing up and in descents they are equally assisted by vigorously pulling at the tail.”<sup>42</sup> In later years, however, their quality was deteriorated for the want of well-built stallion which were exclusively employed in officialdom, and they became, according to Eden, ‘vicious, obstinate, weedy, wretched, animals compared with those of Thibet and Sikkim.’<sup>43</sup> Their prices also became ‘exorbitant’ as the mares began to be widely used for the purpose of domestic carriage in the countryside. The mules were, however, relatively cheaper. Sometimes, they were raised by crossbreeding the Bhutanese pony and the Tibetan ass, but more frequently, they were imported from Phari in Tibet. Their price in Tibet was reportedly as cheap as Rs60-70.<sup>44</sup> They were ‘really magnificent’, as Eden described, and he ‘never saw finer or handsomer animals of this class.’<sup>45</sup> But these mules were more vicious and less manageable than the ponies. Ponies and mules apart, sheep, goats and asses were also found plying in this route with cargo. Available information suggests that the Tibetan breeds were superior in this class of beasts. The Tibetan sheep, for example, could carry a load of 15-20 kg each as against the carrying capacity of 6-12 kg for the Bhutanese sheep and goat.<sup>46</sup> The ass was, however, the most robust animal capable of carrying about 40 kg each. But they

were employed exclusively for carrying salt in this route. The Kumpas of Tibet also employed the ewes and the yak as the beast of burden but their uses were limited.

A striking variety was evident in the commodities of exchange between Bhutan and Assam. The following table gives a glimpse of this diversity. It is compiled from available information about three contemporary fairs in Assam where the Bhutanese traders largely participated. These figures, however, exclude the barter trade that was reportedly extensive in such fairs.<sup>47</sup>

*Table 1: The commodities of exchange between Bhutan and Assam*

Bhutanese Commodities			Assamese Commodities		
Name	Amount	Value (Rs)	Name	Amount	Value (Rs)
Ponies	27 nos.	16,000	Paddy	7,596 mds	6,207
Sheep	131 nos.	393	Rice	6,443 mds	12,596
Dogs	25 nos.	226	Tobacco		36
Yak tails	165 nos.	143	Betel nuts	1,249 pans	278
Bee-wax	158 mds	6,335	Molasses	21 mds	63
Lac	126 mds	1,209	Dried fishes	198 mds	1,958
Dye	11,563 bundles	79	Eria silk cloth	1,207 pcs	9,907
Chillies	223 mds	716	Cotton cloth	1,467 pcs	3,136
Spices	1,354 mds	3,207	Other cloths	2638 pcs	9,471
Walnuts	10,000 nos	31	Brass pots	950 nos	1,887
Rock salt	--	18,825	Iron bars	275 pcs	202
Gold	120 tola	2,400	Others	--	1,685
Blankets	6,673 nos	19,484			
Musks	--	451			
Bhutia rags	841 nos.	421			
Others	--	5,183			
<b>Total</b>	--	75,103	<b>Total</b>	--	47,426

*Source: W.W.Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. 1, 1879, pp.143-145*

The table shows that ponies, rock salt, blankets, bee-wax, spices and gold dominated the Bhutanese commodities of exchange, and that the Bhutanese traders purchased mainly paddy, rice, eria silk cloth, and various types of cotton cloths. The Kacharee tribe of Assam reportedly wove certain varieties of cloth like dunko lepa cloth and kharu cloth, included under 'other cloth' in the table, exclusively for sale to the Bhutanese traders.<sup>48</sup> The nature of commodities in this exchange, however, indicates that this trade route gave rise to trans-ecological exchanges. Majority of the goods that Assam exported through this route, as evident in Table 1, were the products of advanced human civilisation. The goods from the other end of the route were more of the kind of 'stepeeland or woodland products'. We may cite in this context the products like ponies, yak tails, sheep, dogs etc as the products of the pastoral civilisation, and lac, dye, spice, bee-wax, raw rubber, walnuts, chillies etc as the forest products. While discussing the nature of this exchange Pemberton referred to the list of goods as provided by Ralph Fitch in Hakluyt Voyages (1583), and remarked, "However wonderful the variety of articles which the improved manufacturing skill of Europe now enables the merchants of Bengal to offer in barter for the produce brought down by those of Tibet and Bhutan; the latter bring to the market, in diminished quantities, only the same goods which they imported three centuries ago."<sup>49</sup> The Bhutan-Assam trade route thus corroborates the hypothesis of Curtin that historically the commodities usually passed across the ecological divide.

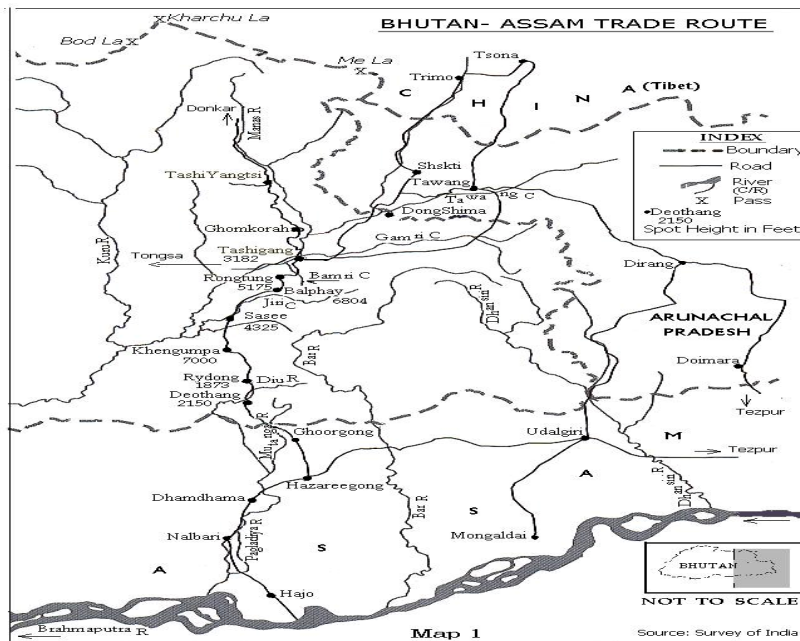
From the tour-dairy of the missions we gather a fair knowledge about the comparative speeds of travel at different stretches of this trade route. The speed of traffic in this route is expected to correspond to that of the missions since they made the journey with the similar types of animals as the traders. But two qualifications should be noted in this contest that might cause variations in travelling speeds between them. First, the missionaries carried with them only their provisions whereas the traders moved along their cargo. Second, the missionaries were completely foreigners to this

land and climate; in contrast, the traders were regular visitors in this route. But since these factors affect our estimation in opposite directions, our judgement is largely balanced. Speed is here measured as the distance travelled per day assuming that each march, as reported in Griffiths's tour-dairy, began at dawn and ended at dusk. With a total distance of 168 km covered in 11 marches,<sup>50</sup> the mean speed in this route comes to around 15.3 km per day. Wide variations from this mean value is expected to occur at different stretches of the route because of the differences in their gradients, as seen in the annexed map (Map 1). We have estimated that in the hilly terrain, the speed was less than 14 km per day. On the plain, in contrast, it was around 17 km a day. Pemberton himself estimated that the average speed per day was nine miles five furlong (i.e. around 14.5 km) for a journey in the hilly terrain between Dewangiri and Poonakha, a distance of about 400 kms. In respect of this estimate, he observed, "In so difficult a country, with heavily laden collies, [it] is as much as can be calculated upon with any certainty, at that season of the year, in which the journey was effected."<sup>51</sup> The speed indeed fell drastically if the journey was conducted in rainy days.

### **Tashigang: The Origin**

Tashigang was the origin of the Bhutan-Assam trade route. It was an important place of Bhutan where Raja Chhogyal Minjur Tempa, the third Deb,<sup>52</sup> built a three-storied dzong (the fortified monastery) facing the river Manas in 1667 after extending his authority to eastern Bhutan.<sup>53</sup> As the dzong rendered protection to the people from wars and natural calamities, human settlements used to spring up densely in and around such dzongs. Tasgong's prosperity in the contemporary Bhutan also emerged out of such a development process. By the nineteenth century, it became a populous settlement with an extended hinterland all around. Because of this, and also since the dzong participated in the border trade,<sup>54</sup> markets were developed there with supplies of both the Bhutanese and Tibetan commodities.<sup>55</sup> Tashigang, however, contributed a few commodities to those transactions. Although there were good arable lands in its

surrounding villages, surplus production seldom occurred. Among the articles of export that were produced locally, stick-lac<sup>56</sup> was an important item. It was procured substantively from the valley of Tashigang. Tashigang was also famous for straight iron swords, known as das,<sup>57</sup> 3 feet in length with spear and arrow head, which the neighbouring countries highly acclaimed for. Iron ores locally available in the hills at the northern foot of the castle were used for this purpose. These apart, maddar (the raw material of manjistha, a dye) and natural wax were collected from forests in its vicinities and jubrung (a spice) was procured from the north-east mountain for the purpose of export. But the majority of the products that went down the route came from Tibet.



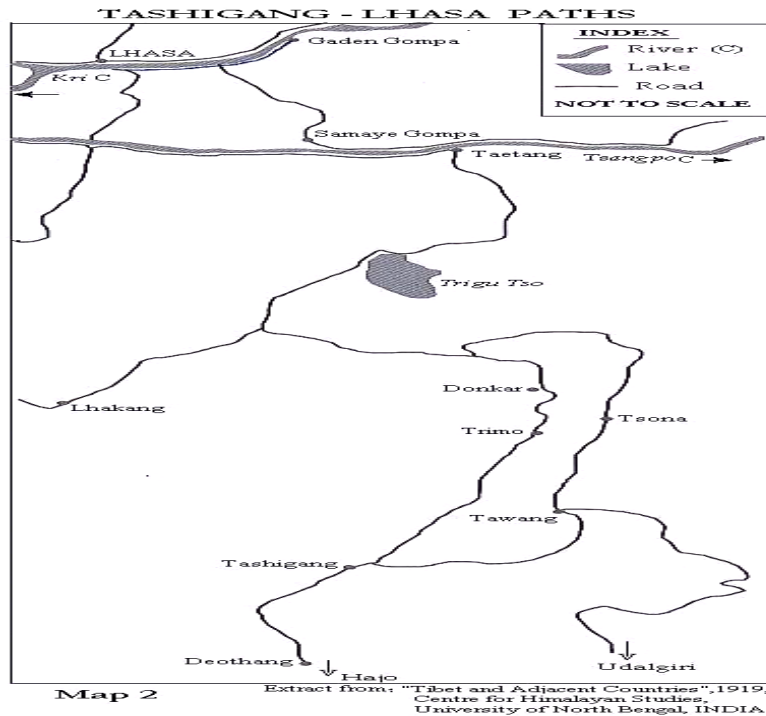
In fact, Tashigang's importance as the origin was ensured by its road connections with Tibet, as adumbrated above. There were two paths between Tashigang and Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, through the valley of the river Manas (vide Map 2). One

of them ran via Tawang.<sup>58</sup> In between Tashigang and Tawang there were two rivers, the Gamri-chu and the Tawang-chu, intercepted by a steep spur. A three-day march upstream the Tawang-chu led to the Bhutan-Tibet Border at Dong Shima where a bridge was available to cross the flowing river. From Tawang a road went to Tsona Dzong, and thence to Lhasa. The bulk of the Tibetan trade was conveyed over this path to the plain. There was another path in between Tashigang and Lhasa. The northern hinterland of Tashigang was dotted with villages. From one such village, Tashi yangtshi, ran a road along the Ging-la to Lhasa via Donkar. According to White, the Ging-la path was 'an easy and good trade route'<sup>59</sup> which the Assam-bound Tibetan traders used extensively during the winter. The Tibetan merchants, however, brought with them coloured carpet (especially red), gold dust, rock salt, chowries, musk, Chinese silk, dye and bee-wax. The Bhutanese traders used to purchase woollen cloths, rock salts and ponies from Tibet for the Assam-bound trade.

Some products were, however, added to the merchandise in the route. The products like walnuts, musk and caoutchouc (raw rubber) were available mainly in the lower ranges (below 3,000 feet above the sea level). Sometimes, the travelling traders added those to their merchandise from the places like Dewangiri;<sup>60</sup> but more often, local traders joined the caravans with those commodities.

Tibetan traders apart, merchants of many distant places used to visit this route when the communication between Bhutan and Assam was open through the jurisdiction of the Paro Pilo. The contemporary trade route<sup>61</sup> passed through Kashmir, Nepal, the Mooraug, Benaras, Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam, and this constituted the southern leg of the Silk Roads. It ensured as much as four times greater traffic in the Bhutan-Assam trade route than what plied during the nineteenth century. Both Bogle and Pemberton, however, noted that the trade had diminished in the wake of 'the jealousy of the Chinese administration' who sought to restrict the flow of British produce in her market. Pemberton observed, "The

suspicious and monopolising spirit of the Chinese Viceroy of Gortope is represented as almost effectually paralysing the operation of his own subjects, and excluding them from the advantages which would inevitably result from an unrestricted admission of British produce to the boundless regions of Tartary and Tibet.”<sup>62</sup> The Paro Pilo also contributed to this decay by an attempt to monopolise this trade in exclusion of other merchants.



### Hajo: The Destination

The traders terminated their journey at Hajo in Assam. Located on the north bank of the Brahmaputra in the erstwhile Kamrup district, the place enjoyed perennial water transport facilities deep into the province of Bengal. The hill traders disposed their commodities in the Hajo market where

the people congregated during the winter on the occasion of a religious fair at the Mahamuni temple. The temple attracted the Hindus and the Buddhists alike. The Hindus believed that a visit to this temple during this festival removed all the sins of their misdeeds. The people of the Brahminical faith, therefore, thronged on this occasion 'from all parts of India'. The Buddhists were equally zealous about this place on the faith that one of their great prophets and legislators was present there. William Robinson described, "The pious Buddhist too, imbued with the some faith, leaves his home in the distant regions of China and Thibet, and crossing the pathless tracts of the snowy Himalayas, burdened with the load of his offences, hastens to make obeisance at the shrine of his country's deity, and departs in joy and gladness, lightened of his load."<sup>63</sup>

As at the other ends of the country, the fair at Hajo had a predominant commercial character. The Bhutanese and the Tibetan traders sold off their commodities in this fair to the visiting pilgrims as well as traders. They were, however, less interested in Indian currency in exchange although the currency prevailed largely in Bhutan during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>64</sup> For making their return journey profitable, they procured the Assamese commodities as much as possible. Available information from three contemporary fairs shows that from the proceeds of their sales, the hill merchants retained only 35 percent in currency, and purchased the Assamese goods by the rest.<sup>65</sup> Staying for about three months at Hajo, these hill traders trekked back along the route in caravans.

Not that all hill traffic was terminated at Hajo. Though it attracted the lion's share, a few of them were diverted to other annual fairs at the base of the Bhutan hills. One such fair was held at Udalgiri in Darang district of Assam during February or March. Hunter described it as an important fair from the viewpoint of 'trade with the Bhutias, and other hill people living beyond the boundary [of Assam]'. He wrote, "It is attended by Bhutias, Tibetan, and Kamputis, as well as by



the people of the plains from all the surrounding Districts, and a few Manipuris.”<sup>66</sup> Similar fairs were also held at Kherkeria and at Doimara. Though these places belonged to the territory of Bhutan, a large number of people from Assam participated in those fairs, and a trade relation was ensured between Bhutan and Assam.

### **Nodes and Links**

Away from Tashigang the first resting place for the traders was Rongtung, around 10 km from the origin. It appears from the annexed map (vide Map 1) that the difference in altitude between these places was around 2,000 feet so that the journey was steep up the hills. Following the waves of the mountains, the connecting link assumed a zigzag direction. From Tashigang it descended gradually for a stretch of about 3km along the course of the river Manas running around 1,000 feet above its bed. The road subsequently met the river Bamri, crossed it at its confluence with another torrent without any support of a bridge, and then became very steep upwards for a little long while. The steepness lessened only at the approach towards Rongtung. The roadsides were not, however, uniform all along. Till its stretch to the river Bamri, the wayside places were largely barren, vegetated only with coarse grasses, stunted shrubs and occasionally with long-leaf pines. A few villages sparsely occurred about the Bamri, and as the road reached nearby Rongtung, the terrace cultivation appeared in sight. Rongtung was basically an agrarian settlement where rice was cultivated in the summer, and barley or wheat during the winter. There was the Castle of Rongtung nearby a stream. Traders in this route took a night-rest here for further journey onwards.

The next leg of journey was from Rongtung to Balphay, a distance of around 10 km. The journey continued to be ascending as Balphay was 1,600 feet above Rongtung (vide Map 1). The link was very undulating in this area along the slope of the hills causing the journey hazardous. From Rongtung, the road inclined steeply, and only after crossing some depressions, it got a relatively plain stretch through the

woods of oak. The woods were neither dense nor continuous, scattering rather here and there on the downs. Beyond those woods, a sharp inclination followed again, quite abruptly this time, leading the road to a height of 10,000 feet above the sea level. The journey was difficult as well as hazardous. It was particularly so at some places where the road ran along the edges of barren summits that were covered only with brown and low grasses. At the fag end of the journey, there was descent for about 2,000 feet. In its downward course, the road met a pagoda at a height of 8,000 feet above the sea level before finally entering Balphay from its north-east. The place, however, provided good accommodation. Most of the houses were well-built, covered with split bamboo and secured by rattans. Such precautions were necessary in this place as violent winds blew here during the winter from the south and the south-east. Cultivation was not, however, very developed. The limited lands that were put into cultivation were meant primarily for turnips, radishes and barely. The quality of their yields showed that the soil and climate were not very suitable for agriculture.

From Balphay the journey proceeded to Sasee for about 18 km through a headlong fall from 6,804 feet above the sea level to 4,325 feet (vide Map 1). The connecting road from Balphay descended steeply for over 2,500 feet up to the river Geeri. This link was conspicuously narrow here, and ran through the decomposed flank of a mountain. An absence of mind might cause fatal to a traveller. Griffiths noted, "It was of such a nature that a slip of any sort would in many places [of the road] have precipitated one several hundred feet."<sup>67</sup> The road then ran downwards over the bed of the river Jiri for little more than a kilometre. This course was available only during the winter when the river became dry. Leaving the riverbed behind, the link took a turn for a continuous upsway excepting a down of 500 feet, and encountered again the river Jiri. Crossing the river finally led the road to Sasee. The place was not at all a prosperous settlement in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The houses were not as organised as one found in Balphay. Cultivation was also little undertaken,

and was confined mainly to barley, buckwheat and hemp. The next node on the route was Khengumpa, approximately 16 km away from Sasee. Given the difference of longitude between these nodes (vide Map 1), the link had to ascend by 2,700 feet. But the latter segment of the road was much steeper than this as its former stretch was descending. Initially the road from Sasee went downwards up to the river Dimree. The river remained considerably wide even in winter but could be crossed along with the laden animals. There was another torrent a few kilometres away but it remained dry in winter. In between these rivers, the road ran undulating. But after crossing the torrent it became very steep upwards, and continued to be so till Khengumpa was reached. The journey on this link in caravan was difficult especially when it proceeded through the open ridges of spurs at the approach of Khengumpa. The roadsides were not, however, monotonous in vegetation. It varied from the Bapeel vegetation near Sasee through the humid and sub-tropical trees near Khengumpa. There were the woods of fir as well as the forest of oak resembling, according to Griffiths, 'much our well known English oak'.<sup>68</sup> Khengumpa was also a smaller settlement but agriculture was relatively developed. There were a number of valleys surrounding this node where cultivation flourished. There were also plantations of tobacco and Bobosa (Clensine Coracana) in gardens attached to the dwelling houses.

The journey then proceeded to Rydong. Around 18 km away from Khengumpa this settlement grew on the bottom of a rather narrow valley. Travelling traders used this node as the final halting place before reaching at the plain. The inhabitants took agriculture as the mainstay of their livelihood. A good deal of barley cultivation came to notice in this place during the winter. In contrast to the previous journey, however, travel from Khengumpa to Rydong was descending. It was from 7,000 feet above sea level to 1,900 feet. From the outskirts of Khengumpa the road was steep and rugged passing along the open ridges of the mountains or the narrow rock-corridors. During this journey the mountain vegetation gradually disappeared and the looks of the plain

came to notice as the road approached Rydong.

From Rydong the route went for about 11 km to reach Dewangiri. It was the last halting place in Bhutan. There was no human settlement on the waysides. The journey was easy as the road was inclined very gently, and also because of the bridge that was constructed on the river Diu. It was mandatory for the visiting traders to Assam that they should return back within a stipulated time. According to the custom of this border town, the local king allowed the traders to cross the border only when they left their brethren at the town as security. These temporary inhabitants constituted a large segment of population in this place during the trade season. Dewangiri was, however, a densely populated place. The people were mostly Bhutanese living in simple huts. A few stone-built houses were also there during the first half of the nineteenth century. Such houses were generally three-storied. The owners used to occupy the middle floor while the second floor was divided into several compartments for the purpose of rent. The ground floor was left for cooking. Water was, however, scarce as no stream or spring ran nearby. The local people brought water from distant places by aqueducts made of hollow trunks of small trees. Dewangiri had a special attraction for temple. There were a number of Buddhist temples where the travelling traders, by virtue of their faith, should visit for blessings. An extensive market was developed in this node for exchanging the hill products with the products of the plain. The people from Assam, especially the Kacharees, assembled in this market to trade on barter their own products like rice and dried fish for the manjistha.

The next halting place was Ghoorgong, around 13 km away from Dewangiri. The road descended steeply at its initial stretch, and boulders scattering on the way frequently obstructed the journey. Soon it met the Durunga, a river that remained dry in winter. Similar to the river Jiri, this river bed was used in winter by the caravans to march for a few kilometres. Along the river course they left the hills and entered Ghoorgong from its west. This first node in Assam

was very close to the hills, and the intermediate gentle slope was covered with fine sward. There was hardly any cultivation in and around this place presumably because of unfriendly soils. The people perhaps lived on pasturing.

Leaving Ghoorgong the route advanced to Hazareegong. This was a 13-km journey. No land on the waysides was cultivated; nor was there any trace of villages. Only the woods of simool emerged occasionally in sight. The interception of river was also minimal. Only once the river Mutanga crossed the connecting road. Though this river remained wide and violent during the rainy season, it was almost without water during the winter so that the caravans could cross it without much inconvenience. Hazareegong was, however, predominated by the Bhutanese although it belonged to Assam. Agriculture could not flourish here, as the soils were less fertile. There was one resting-place at Hazareegong, locally called wam-ghur, where travellers took rest at night.

From Hazareegong the road went to Dhamdhama at a distance of about 15 km. The waysides were plain as before, and covered with dense reed and grass jungle. Only a few small and impoverished villages came on the way. This stretch of land earlier accommodated some large villages, but those were destroyed, as Pemberton noted, 'from the effects of the hostile invasion by our troops under Captain Bogle in 1836.<sup>69</sup> The connecting road bore a sign of negligence albiet its jurisdiction under the British governance. It got better maintenance only at the proximity of the mainland. A small but rapid stream, however, intercepted the road twice with a bed of pebbles. Fewer inconveniences were met to negotiate these interceptions. But difficulties cropped up to cross another river, the Noa Nuddee, at the fag end of the link. Because of its sandbank and quick sands, any venture on foot involved risks. Even in winter, the river flowed at a speed of around 5 kmph for a width of 70 yards. Elephants were usually employed here to ferry. On the bank of this river, Dhamdhama was situated. It was basically an agrarian settlement. The people cultivated rice as the main crop and

the oilseeds the next. Sugarcane was also cultivated to some extent.

From Dhamdhama the caravans advanced about 16 km for the next halt at Nalbari. There was neither any river nor any long stretch of woods on the way. The waysides were dotted with villages, which, as Griffiths described, were concealed under the bamboo bushes from the views of the travellers. These villages also caught the notice of Pemberton. He noted, "All the fruit trees common to Bengal were found growing in profusion around the houses of the inhabitants; the herds of cattle were numerous and in the finest condition, and everything bespoke happiness and content."<sup>70</sup> Nalbari was, however, a busy commercial centre. A good number of migrant Marwari merchants settled here during the nineteenth century. These merchants owned several warehouses for long-distance trade, and dealt mainly with visiting traders.

The 27-km journey in the last leg, i.e. from Nalbari to Hajo, ran amidst extensively cultivated fields and the clusters of village, much similar to the preceding roadsides. There were also a number of jheels, the big ponds, well stocked with waterfowl and waders. The otherwise easy journey on this plain was, however, circumvented by as many as four rivers, at least two of which threw challenges to cross.

#### **Section IV: Conclusion**

This study thus shows that there was a lively trade route between Bhutan and Assam during the nineteenth century. From Tashigang in Bhutan it ran around 170 km to reach Hajo in Assam with its intermediate stretch distributed almost equally between the hills and the plain. The route consisted of eleven links out of which six belonged to the hill terrain and five in the plain. Journey on the mountain links was tedious, and involved a good amount of risk. Adversities were generated out of steep ascends and descends of the links as well as from their narrow breaths over the open ridges of the mountains. Though these hazards were absent in the

journey on plain, the obstacles here were created by the rivers which did not go dry even in winter. Most of the rivers in the hills, however, remained dry in winter so that the travellers walked over their beds in caravans.

This route assumed importance because of the fact that, apart from the Bhutanese, a large number of Tibetan traders used this course. There were two paths connecting Tibet with this route through the valley of the Manas. Those are: a) a path via Tashigang and b) a path via Donkar through the Ging la. Caravans used to ply on this route during the winter because of favourable climate and also to take advantage of dry river courses. The pack animals that the traders used consisted of ponies, mules and asses in the main, and sheep, goat, asses, ewes and yak to some extent. The Tibetan species dominated among the beasts of burden. Also the Tibetan goods were predominant in the cargo. Either the Bhutanese traders imported those from Tibet, or the kumpas directly brought those down the route. The nature of the commodities traded between Bhutan and Assam indicates that the trade route gave rise to trans-ecological exchanges in conformity with the hypothesis of Curtin.

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<sup>1</sup> Vide for example Françoise Pommeret in his article ‘Ancient Trade Partners: Bhutan, Cooch Bihar and Assam (17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries)’, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Autumn, 2000, P.1. She contested the hypothesis, advocated, among others, by C.T. Dorji that “The kingdom remained a sealed book for many centuries....” See his *A Political and Religious History of Bhutan (1651-1906)*, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> The seven duars were Ghurkola, Banska, Chapaguri, Chapakamar and Bijni in Kamrup district, and Buri-guma and Kullung in the Darrang district. There was another duar, Kuriapara duar, in

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jurisdiction of Tawang Rajah. For details of these duars see William Robinson's Descriptive Account of Asam: with a Sketch of the Tea-Plant of Asam, p. 348, p. 294.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the forest of one such duar Kishen Kant Bose noted, from Bijni to Wandipore in Bhutan through very high jungle to the extent 'An elephant or rhinoceros cannot be seen in it when standing up, In this jungle, when the sun shines, the heat is intolerable, and when sun ceases to shine a person cannot remain in it without a fire on account of innumerable mosquitoes and other insects with which it is filled'. See Kuloy, H. K. ed., Political Missions to Bootan, Baboo Kishen Kant Bose's Account of Bootan.(1815), p.355. For the details of antisocial elements. See John M'Cosh's *Topography of Assam*, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> William Griffith, *Bhutan 1837-1838*.

<sup>5</sup> R.Boileu Pemberton, Report on Bootan.

<sup>6</sup> T.Matthew Ciolek, Digitising Data on Eurasian Trade Routes: an experimental notation system  
<http://www.ciolek.com/PAPERS/pnc-berkeley-02.html>, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> J.P.Drege and E.M.Buhrer, *The silk road Saga, Facts on File*. NewYork, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Morris Rossabi, 'The silk roads: An educational Resource', *Education About Asia*, Vol.4, 1999, pp.16-20.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, L.Boulnois, *The silk road*, trans. D.Chamberlain, 1966; I.M.Franck and D.M.Brownstone, *The silk road: A history, Facts on File*.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Hopkrik, *Foreign devils on the silk road: The search for the lost treasure of central Asia*.

<sup>11</sup> Franck and Brownstone, *The silk road*, pp.30-32.

<sup>12</sup> P.D.Curtain, *Cross cultural trade in world history*, p.16.

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<sup>13</sup> David Christain, "Silk roads or steppe roads? The silk roads in world history", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2000, pp.1-26.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> For religious and cultural exchanges, see J.H.Bentley, *Old world encounters; Cross cultural contacts and exchanges in pre-modern times*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993

<sup>16</sup> For the spread of disease and the exchange of gene along the silk roads, see J.Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel*, Vintage, London, 1988, chap. 11.

<sup>17</sup> L.Boulnois, *The silk road*, p.60.

<sup>18</sup> For the decline of land routes in the silk roads, vide Morris Rossabi, 'The decline of the central Asian caravan trade' in *Ecology and Empire*, Vol.1, Nomads in the cultural evolution of the old world, ed G.Seaman, Ethnographics/USC, Los Angeles, 1990, pp.81-102.

<sup>19</sup> A.G.Frank, *ReOrient: Global economy in the Asian age*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> A.G.Frank and B.K.Gills (ed), *The world system: Five hundred years or five thousand*, Routledge, New York, 1992.

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<sup>22</sup> W.H.McNeill, 'World history and the rise of the west', *Journal of World History*, v.9, 1998, pp.215-236.

<sup>23</sup> M.G.S.Hodgson, 'The great western transmutation' in *Rethinking world history: Essays on Europe, Islam and world history*, Edmund Burke III, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p.47.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>25</sup> Frank and Gill, *The world system*.

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<sup>26</sup>Haraprasad Ray, 'Trade routes from northern India and Bangladesh to south and southwest China: Some *suggestions for an integral economic development of the region*', *Asiatic Studies*, v.18, no. 1 & 2, pp. 118-119.

<sup>27</sup> M.Florian, 'An introduction to network models used in Transportation planning' in M.Florian (ed.) *Transportation Planning Models* pp .137-152

<sup>28</sup> The term he used is Die Seidenstrassen. Vide Drege and Buhrer, *The silk road Saga*, p.6

<sup>29</sup> David Christania, Silk roads or steppe roads? The silk roads in world history, *Journal of World History*, v. 11, no. 1, 2000, p.2

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p.5

<sup>31</sup> This is deducted from the evidence that the hill traders returned back from Assam with merchandise. See W.W.Hunter *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol. 1, p. This is also no evidence in the literature that the Assamese traders visited the hills.

<sup>32</sup> Haraprasad Ray, 'Trade routes from northern India and Bangladesh to south and southwest China', pp. 118-119.

<sup>33</sup> R.Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.78.

<sup>34</sup> Kumpa was the southern portion of Tibet lying between the right bank of the river Tsanpo and the northern ridges of Bhutan. See for details David Field Rennie, *Bhotan and the Story of the Doar War*, p.7.

<sup>35</sup> William Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Asam*, p. 347.

<sup>36</sup> R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.19.

<sup>37</sup> W.W.Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol. 1, pp. 143-145.

<sup>38</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. XI, p.183.

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- <sup>40</sup> R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.79.
- <sup>41</sup> H.K.Kuloy, ed.,*Political Missions to Bootan*, the Hon'ble Ashley Eden:Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64, p.124.
- <sup>42</sup> H.K.Kuloy, ed.,*Political Missions to Bootan*, Dr. William Griffiths: Journal of the Mission to Bootan in 1837-38, p.328.
- <sup>43</sup> H.K.Kuloy, ed.,*Political Missions to Bootan*, the Hon'ble Ashley Eden: Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64, p. 124.
- <sup>44</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>46</sup> R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.70.
- <sup>47</sup> W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol.1, pp.143-145.
- <sup>48</sup> *ibid.* p.144.
- <sup>49</sup> R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.81.
- <sup>50</sup> Willium Griffith, *Bhutan 1837-1838*.
- <sup>51</sup> R.Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.40.
- <sup>52</sup> The Deb Raja was the Prime Minister of Bhutan. He was the principal organ of the Government. Under his control there were four Governors or Pilo of four regions, Punakha, Paro, Wandipoor, and Tongsa. See H.K.Kuloy,ed.,*Political Missions to Bootan*, Baboo Kishen Kant Bose: Account of Bootan,(1815), pp.342-346.
- <sup>53</sup> Nirmala Das, *The Dragon Country*, p.70.

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- <sup>54</sup> D.P. Boot, 'The Dzongs of Bhutan', Himalayan Miscellany, vol. 4, 1999, p.99.
- <sup>55</sup> An important market emerged below the Tashigang dzong. [Pradyumna P. Karan, p.64.]
- <sup>56</sup> J. Claude White, Sikkim and Bhutan, Twenty-One Years on the North-East Frontier, 1887-1908, p. 190
- <sup>57</sup> R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.75.
- <sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p.78.
- <sup>59</sup> J. Claude White, *Sikkim and Bhutan*, p.194.
- <sup>60</sup> The place is presently called Dewathang.
- <sup>61</sup> R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.80.
- <sup>62</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>63</sup> William Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Asam*, p. 259.
- <sup>64</sup> Nicholas Rhodes, 'Coinage in Bhutan', *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Vol.1, No. 1, Autumn, 1999, pp. 105-107.
- <sup>65</sup> See Table 1 above.
- <sup>66</sup> W.W.Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol.1, p.143.
- <sup>67</sup> H.K.Kuloy, ed., *Political Missions to Bootan*, Dr. William Griffiths: *Journal of the Mission to Bootan in 1837-38*, p.280.
- <sup>68</sup> *ibid.* p.279.
- <sup>69</sup> R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.39.
- <sup>70</sup> *ibid.*