

TIBET AND BENGAL

A Study in Trade Policy and Trade Pattern (1775-1875)

Arabinda Deb

The East India Company's relations with Tibet was initiated by Warren Hastings, 'the greatest of the great Governor Generals of India'. The first contact was begun by the Tibetans. Immediately on the news of the defeat of the Bhutanese king Desi Shidariva (1) by the British forces in the battle for Cooch Behar (1772-1774), Palden Yeshe (the third Panchen Lama) addressed his historic letter of mediation to the Governor General (2). Warren Hastings seized the opportunity and in reply proposed a general treaty of amity and peace between Bengal and Tibet. He could now be more generous in his settlement with Bhutan (Anglo-Bhutan Treaty of 1774) once he had secured control over Cooch Behar. He wrote and obtained passport for a European to proceed to Tibet for negotiation of a treaty. He chose George Bogle for the purpose. On grounds of "intelligence," "exactness," "coolness," and "moderation of temper," there could not be a better choice. Once he outlined the "purpose" in his instructions to Bogle the Governor General left his agent perfectly free to do as he liked and time and

money were freely at his disposal. In his letter of appointment Bogle was told "The design of your mission is to open a mutual and equal communication of trade between the inhabitants of Bhutan (Bhote=Tibet) and Bengal and you will be guided by your own judgement in using such means of negotiation as may be most likely to effect the purpose"(3).

Apart from the unique appointment and instructions, Warren Hastings sought information about trade between Tibet and Siberia, Tibet and China and Tibet and Kashmir. The envoy was armed with a memorandum on the history, religion and hierarchy of Tibet. Perhaps a better beginning in trade with Himalayas and Trans-Himalayas could not have been made. The first British mission to Tibet and Bhutan (1774-1775) was an exercise in commercial diplomacy par excellence.

While at Tashichhodzong in Bhutan, Bogle pointedly noted the monopoly trading interests of the Bhutanese officials including the Deba Raja and the Paro Penlop. He sought to secure their co-operation by allowing them greater privileges (through a Parwana or order of the Governor General) and security of trade at Rangpur and Dinajpur in North Bengal with the intention of extending it to Calcutta. In 1775 he succeeded in concluding a commercial treaty with the Deba

Raja, granting the Bhutanese "exclusive trade in sandal indigo redskin tobacco betelnut and pan (leaves)". His idea was to promote trade with Bhutan and Tibet and ensure market for English broadcloth through "accustomed" native agency without arousing the suspicions of hillmen after the British political ascendancy in Bengal(4).

Bogle travelled only in a small part of Tibet proper and had audience with the third Panchen Lama with whom he built up a good rapport. Within his limited experience in Tibet he did not fail to record a graphic summary of the scope and pattern of Tibet's trade with other countries. The Tibetans traded with the Chinese, the Mongols and the Kalmuks in the north and Bengal, Assam Nepal and Bhutan bordering Tibet on the south. He gave the information that no duties were levied on goods and trade was protected and free from exactions (5). This was one reason for a large number of foreign merchants like the Kashmiris and the Nepalese to settle in Tibet. The Kashmiri merchants had establishments in all the principal towns of Tibet. They also took part in the Tibet-China trade through Selling. The Gossains "the trading pilgrims of India," traded in articles of great value and small bulk.

Tibet's trade with China was the most considerable. Imports from China consisted of coarse

tea, silk and satins, porcelain, glass and cutlery and knives, talents of silver and some tobacco. Tibet paid in gold, pearls, coral chanks (shell) and broadcloth. The Kalmuks brought Siberian products like furs, hides, cowtails, bastard pearls and silver. They were paid in broadcloth, coral and amber beads, spices and gold. The predominance of China in the Tibetan trade, the importance of broadcloth for the Tibetans, both for exchange and consumption, are two firm intelligence which emanated from Bogle's mission. This was no mean achievement for a man who never visited Lhasa, the seat of Tibetan authority, and who could not lay hands on any Tibetan official statistics. The pattern of Tibet's trade given by Bogle was confirmed by Turner's Report (1784) where broadcloth and spices were mentioned as the most important items in the export trade from Bengal to Tibet through Nepal and also in Bhutan's export to Tibet (6). Most of Bhutanese exports like rice, tobacco, indigo, sandal wood and munjeet were secured from the adjoining Dooars and the Bengal districts. These were exchanged for tea and other Chinese commodities, rock salt, wool, sheep's skin and narrow friezes for other home consumption (7). Bogle also recorded how the trade between Bengal and Tibet through Nepal suffered due to high duties on trade imposed by the Gurkha king to meet his military expenses. The principal articles of merchandise between Bengal and Tibet were

"broadcloth, otter skins, indigo, pearl, coral, amber and other beads, chank shells, spices and tobacco sugar, malta, striped satins and a few white cloths, chiefly coarse". The returns were made in gold dust, musk and cowtails" (8).

Bogle's report for the first time made Englishmen aware of how China and Nepal had extensive trading interests in Tibet and, therefore, were important factors in the Tibetan issue.

Acknowledging the "intricacy" of the subject, Bogle did not fail to record informations about the current specie which, as he said, was of "capital importance towards understanding the nature of its trade"(9). Prior to Gurkha conquest of Nepal the three Newar Kingdoms of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon used to export coins to Tibet which was a "source of considerable profit" to them. During the rule of the last ruler of Bhatgaon the coins were debased which caused a decrease of nearly one half of their intrinsic value. The problem of debased coins proved intractable as later events showed. This led to desertion of the Nepalese mints and there was no other currency. Only the silver mohurs ("identical with Muhammedan half rupee"), Chinese brass money and a few specimens of silver coinage known as "Tsang Money" were in use. This silver was procured from China in stamped lumps.

In Turner's list specie is given as the first item of export from Nepal to Tibet.

The Tibetans raised the issue of debased silver coins with Prithinarayan, the founder of the Gurkha dynasty in Nepal. It was one of the main issues which led to the first Tibet-Gurkha War (1788-1792) in which China came in as an "ally of long standing" on the side of the Tibetans (10).

After this war Chinese "jealousy and influence" became more pronounced in trade policy in Tibet. British frontier officials and the reports of the envoys very often refer to it. Along with Gurkha restrictions on trade this explains a steady decline in Tibet-Bengal trade.

Indeed, Warren Hasting's policy towards Bhutan and Tibet, the Anglo-Cooch Behar Treaty (1772), the Anglo-Bhutan Treaty (1774); George Bogle's mission to Tibet and his trade treaty with Bhutan (1775); brought about a structure of relationship which had great potential for the development of Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan trade. It is the case of a lost horizon in history that this structure was not nurtured for a century. The cost to the British-Indian treasury was a war against Bhutan (1864-65) and a military mission

against Tibet (1904).

In 1786 Purangir Gossain arrived in Calcutta from Tibet. On being questioned he stated that "merchants had already found their way from Bengal to Tashilhumpo where the markets were being represented as being well supplied with English and Indian manufactures". This flow of Indian and English goods to the markets of Tashilhumpo was the outcome of Bogle and Turner's mission to Tibet.

At the time of the Anglo-Gurkha war in 1815 David Scott, the Collector of Rangpur, sent Krishnakanta Bose to Bhutan to negotiate disputes between Cooch Behar and Bhutan. Krishnakanta's Report translated by David Scott in English, in part confirmed the pattern of Tibet's trade through Bhutan as given earlier by George Bogle besides furnishing new and crucial commercial information.

Bhutan's foreign trade was carried on almost entirely with Tibet and Bengal and Krishnakanta underlined that almost the whole trade was monopolised by the officialdom in Bhutan, beginning with the Dharma Raja. He wrote, "The Dharma Raja trades with a capital of twentyfive or thirty thousand rupees" besides drawing annual income from the land to the south of the hills (11). The Paro Penlop and the western Bhutan chiefs had

monopoly interests in the Tibet-Bengal trade through Bhutan and also in the inter-dooars trade. Similarly, the Tongsa Penlop (the eastern Bhutan chief) had his trading interests spread in Assam Dooars through Dewangiri. The chief of Thimpu "trades to a greater extent" than the Punakha chief and "feeds" the court for six months.

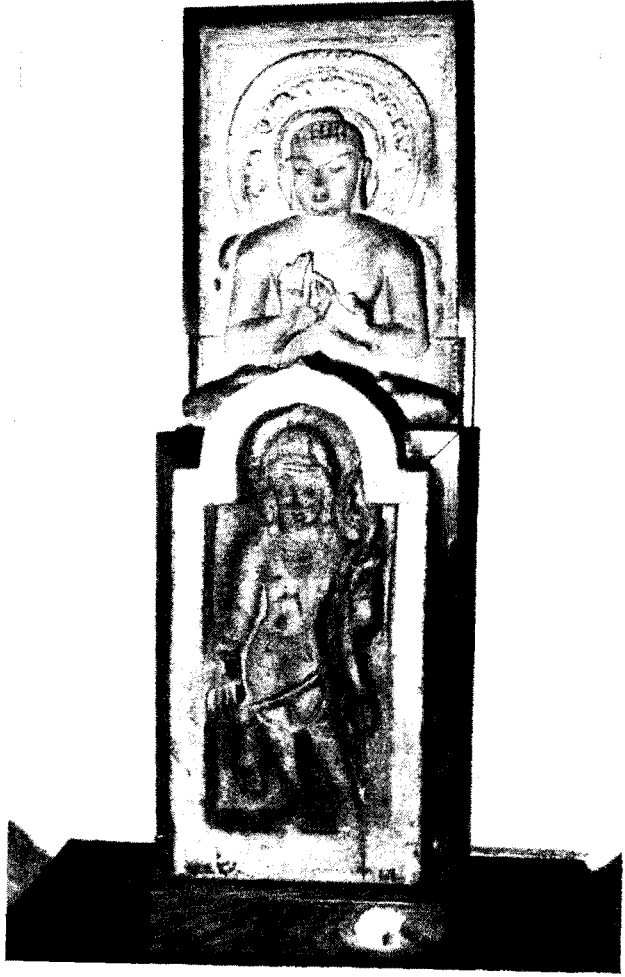
No wonder that the Kashmiri merchants of Tibet could not make a dent in Bhutan to compensate for the losses which they sustained due to Gurkha policy of exclusiveness in Nepal in respect of the Nepal-Tibet trade. In the list furnished by Krishnakanta of Bhutan's exchange trade with Tibet the following four groupings can be made. The food items exported to Tibet consisted of rice, parched rice (drawn from the Dooars) wheat and flours of dhemsî. Secondly, woollen and cotton clothes (broadcloth is not specifically mentioned). In the third category can be placed spices (nutmegs and cloves) and indigo along with sandal, red sandal and asafoetida. In the fourth category of exports to Tibet fall the stones, precious and semi-precious. Excepting rice, a similar grouping of trade items could be made in Turner's list of the export trade from Bengal to Tibet through Nepal. Among Bhutan's indigenous products which became trade items Krishnakanta mentions tanga horses (strong little pony of Bhutan and Tibet used in the carrying trade), blankets, walnuts, rock-salt (exported

PLATES

1. Guru Padmasambhava
2. Gautama Buddha/Avalokiteśvara
3. Sambara
4. Vijayā
5. Mañjuśrī
6. Avalokiteśvara
7. Tārā



ONE



TWO



THREE



FOUR



FIVE



SIX



SEVEN

to Nepal and Assam also), oranges and munjeet (madder). He wrote. "Besides the officers of government and their servants no person can trade with foreign country nor can the inhabitants sell tangan horses without the Deba Raja's permission. All the horses and blankets are monopolised at a low price by the officers in whose jurisdiction they are produced (12). From Tibet the Bhutanese imported tea silver and gold and embroidered silk goods in that order. The tea the Bhutanese consume themselves, the greater part of the silk goods for clothing and hangings in their temples and with silver they mix lead and coin into narayaneer rupees. Tea and silk goods which the Bhutanese imported were obviously of Chinese origin.

In 1838 R. B. Pemberton led the next British mission to Bhutan in the context of a series of territorial disputes in the Dooars of Bengal and Assam. In his report Pemberton spoke of the imperfect nature of materials available in respect of the Tibetan trade. Quoting from *Hakluyt's Voyages* about the travels of Ralph Fitch, the English merchant to Cooch Bihar in 1583 Pemberton comments that the trade between Tibet and Bengal was "almost exactly as it exists at the present day". It would appear from the small table of exports and imports given of the Rangpur-Bhutan trade that in Pemberton's time this trade was in a depressed condition. In his words, "the whole foreign

trade of Bootan which is almost entirely confined to Thibet on the one side and Bengal and Assam on the other can hardly amount to fifty thousand rupees per annum although at one time it was estimated at two lakhs for Assam alone and there is little hope either of any relaxation in the jealous restrictions now imposed upon it or of the admission of our merchants to Bootan and Thibet as long as Chinese policy and influence reign supreme" (13). Pemberton says that the Bhutanese brought almost every article of consumption and luxury "from Dooars plains under Bhutanese control. Among these, cotton and rice were exchanged in barter for the "silks of China and woollens of Tibet"(14). the manufacture of Bhutan was almost "entirely limited to dark coloured blankets". The coloured variety was brought from Tibet. At Rangpur these blankets were sold at rupees two per piece (15) and a hill poney fetched rupees thirtyfive. The far most important of all commercial intercourse "between Tibet and Bengal at the time took place through the Paro Penlop's territory in western Bhutan. He spoke of the "monopolizing spirit" which prevented the "admission of British produce to the bondless regions of Tartary and Thibet". It is to be noticed that in Pemberton's description of the exports from Tibet to Bhutan tea is absent though it occupies the second place in Turner's list and first place in Krishnakant Bose's description.

Pemberton's mission was mainly concerned with the regularisation of political relations with the central Bhutanese authorities and collection of miscellaneous information. Incidentally it throws some light on the pattern of the Tibetan trade. Particularly, his report links up the Dooars (of both Assam and Bengal) with the Tibet-Bengal trade system through Bhutan. Secondly Pemberton's report highlights for the first time that the "system of tributes in kind" prevalent in the Dooars under Bhutan's control was closely linked with the "system of trade". The British insisted on payment in cash of the "tribute" from the Assam Dooars as also in trade. This started a systematic process of monetising the system of exchange. Thirdly, Pemberton's report confirmed earlier observations that the monopoly interests, be that of the hill chiefs or of the Chinese, was a main hurdle in the way of the pioneering free traders of the nineteenth century.

The next British mission under Ashley Eden entered Bhutan in the winter of 1863. In his letter of instructions Eden was told "...further to endeavour to secure free commerce between the subjects of the British and Bootan governments and protection to travellers and merchants"(15). The draft treaty which Eden carried included in Clause IX:

"There shall be free trade between the two governments. No duties shall be levied on Bootanese goods imported into British territories nor shall the Bootan government levy any duties on British goods imported into or transported through the Bootan territories" (16).

The intransigence of the Tongsa Penlop led to the failure of the mission and incidentally the document which Eden signed "under compulsion" contained no provision for trade (17).

The mission's concern was overwhelmingly political and Eden only occasionally mentions of the Tibetan trade and of the great commercial prospects of the Dooars. While describing the market at Paro Eden wrote "...it ought to be the entrepot of the trade of Tibet Tartary China and India. It should be full of depots of broadcloths cotton goods cutlery rice coral tea spices kin-cabs leather and miscellaneous articles of European manufacture brought there to be exchanged for rock-salt, musks, gold dust, borax and silk but under its present rulers not a Tibetan ever ventures to cross the frontier". The lower portion of the valley is "richly cultivated with rice which is procurable in considerable quantities at about two rupees a maund". During his travels he had noted at Ambiok that "the place was so situated in regard

to the hills and the plains that it seemed a sort of natural exchange for the trade of Tibet with that of Bengal. Under a good government there could have been "cotton fields and tea fields and timber depots and countless acres of rice".(18) The Dooars were not as unhealthy as the Terai and the "surplus population of Cooch Behar and Rungpore would readily migrate into this rich tract". In a contemporary English Daily it was stated that the Dooars was rich in "tea soils lime and timber". The Dharma Raja of Bhutan prevented "cultivating tea lest the profitable trade with Tibet be affected" (19).

The treaty of Sinchula (1865) which ended the Dooars War secured "free trade and commerce (Clause IX) between Bhutan and India" (20). The way to Tibet was still closed.

The Bengal Administration Report for 1873-74 stated: "English Wollen and Broadcloth are still much sought after-----notwithstanding the policy of exclusiveness which Chinese influence dictated and imposed upon Tibet"(21).

Already all along the hills tea plantations were providing an outlet for British and Indian capital. These had provided employment for many thousands of Indian labourers. Just across the frontier there were no less than three million

tea drinkers in Tibet. The local government of Bengal became concerned for the tea produced in Darjeeling and the Dooars and wanted to find ways for the Tibetan market. Though members of Parliament scoffed at the idea of pressing tea upon the Chinese to the Bengal Government it was an important point. But the Lieutenant Governor stated: "The Tibetans or their Chinese governors will not, on protectionist principles admit our tea across the passes. An absolute embargo is laid on anything in the shape of tea"(22). Besides tea the Bengal government thought that Manchester and Birmingham goods and Indian indigo had a good market in Tibet. The Chinese remained obstinate in regard to the admission of tea and eventually agreed to admit Indian tea" at the rate of duty not exceeding that at which Chinese tea is imported into England"(23). The duty imposed in England was 6d per pound and the tea drunk in Tibet was very inferior. It was in reality imposition of an ad valorem duty of 150 to 200 percent. This concession was therefore of the slightest value.

At a later date and after experience of failure the whole idea of negotiating with the Chinese for entry into the Tibetan market proved infructuous. It was realised by men like Francis Young-husband that negotiations with the Tibetans would certainly have produced much better results.

This was to say that the need was now felt after more than a hundred years that the thread should be taken up where Warren Hastings and George Bogle had left it.

Notes

1. A.DEB : *Bhutan and India - A Study in Frontier Political Relations 1772-1865* (Calcutta 1976) pp. 72-74
2. This letter received on 29 March 1774 has been reproduced several times.
3. Clements MARKHAM : *The Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa* (London 1876/New Delhi 1971) p.6
4. A.DEB : "George Bogle's Treaty with Bhutan (1775)" in *Bulletin of Tibetology* Vol. VIII No 1 (Gangtok 1971)
5. C.MARKHAM : Op Cit. p. 124 Trade of Tibet
6. *Bulletin of Tibetology* 1984 No 1 pp 21-22
7. C.MARKHAM : Op. Cit. p. 126
8. Ibid p. 128
9. Ibid pp. 128-129
10. Tsepon W.D.SHAKABPA : *Tibet - A Political History* (New Haven 1967) pp 156-170

11. *Political Missions to Bhutan* __ (Bengal Secretariat 1865/New Delhi 1972)p.342
12. Ibid p. 350
13. Ibid p. 230
14. Ibid p. 245
15. Ibid p. 225 Chart
16. Ibid p. 148
17. Surgeon David RENNIE *Bhutan and the Story of the Dooar War* (London 1866/New Delhi 1971) Appendix C p. 407
18. *Political Missions to Bhutan* p. 262
19. *Friend of India* for 13 July 1865 quoted in author's *Bhutan and India* p. 120
20. Author's paper 'Cooch Behar and Bhutan in the context of the Tibetan Trade' in *Kailash* (Journal of Himalayan Studies Kathmandu) Vol.1 (1973) p. 88
21. *Quoted in Bhutan and India* p. 163
22. Quoted in Francis YOUNG HUSBAND *India and Tibet* (London 1910/Delhi 1971) p. 44
23. Ibid p. 52