

## **ANCIENT TRADE PARTNERS: BHUTAN, COOCH BIHAR AND ASSAM (17<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

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### **Abstract**

Western writers have often projected the image of Bhutan as an isolated country, a kind of autarchic mountainous island. This article is an attempt to show that, in fact, Bhutan carried out a substantial trade with her southern neighbours – Bengal (Cooch Bihar) and Assam (Kamrup) – at least from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, if not earlier. This trade is documented in British reports and Bhutanese historical sources, although for the latter, references have been found dispersed in biographies. Bhutan also appears to have been influenced by the weaving and silk techniques of north-east India. Because of trade links and the fact that Cooch Bihar minted money for Bhutan, the latter was able to play a political role in Cooch Bihar until this region was taken over by the British in 1773. From that date, Bhutan was pressed by the British to open her roads to traders, as it was the shortest route to Tibet and Lhasa. However, Bhutan resisted but continued trading in North Bengal and Assam, selling horses, wool products, and musk, while importing cotton cloth, broadcloth, tools, spices and tobacco.

Through this trade with Cooch Bihar and Assam, and by acting as an intermediary for some of the Tibetan products, Bhutan did play her part in the commercial exchanges in north-east India.

Bhutan which practised a policy of isolation especially towards the West, was nevertheless engaged in commercial

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and political relations with her neighbours since a long time. Even though, for religious, cultural and geographic reasons, Tibet was the favoured destination, trade with the south was just as active. In this article we will examine the trade with Bhutan's immediate neighbours to the south: Cooch Bihar situated in the west and Kamrup situated in the east (which today are two Indian districts in West Bengal and Assam respectively). According to the Bhutanese Law Code of 1729<sup>lxxii</sup>, two "Clerks for India" (*rGya drung*), were posted at the frontier with India, to the east and to the west. These posts show that, for the Bhutanese, the circulation of goods was large enough to justify the presence of these officials.

Research in this domain is difficult due to the lack of written sources on the subject in Bhutanese literature, which is essentially of a politico-religious nature. It is only through remarks scattered in some Bhutanese and Tibetan sources as well as the accounts and correspondence of British officials that we can reconstitute a picture, although still sketchy, of the links between Bhutan and her neighbours.

### **Cooch Bihar (Bengal)<sup>lxxiii</sup>**

According to Rhodes<sup>lxxiv</sup>, during the reign of the Cooch Bihar King Nara Narayan (1555-1587), "there was a major trade route between Bengal and Tibet passing through Cooch Behar and Bhutan. This was recorded by the English merchant and traveller Ralph Fitch in 1583, who noted that musk, wool, agate, silk and pepper were purchased." After the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the *Narayani tanka*, called rupee by the British, which was probably first struck around 1583 and took its name after the dynasty, became the most used currency in Cooch Bihar, Assam and Bhutan.<sup>lxxv</sup>

One of the first contacts mentioned in Bhutanese literature took place in the years 1619-20 when the hierach of Bhutan, the *Zhabs drung* Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651), at the request of one of his patrons Darchug Gyeltshen, went to Chapcha which is located to the south of Thimphu on the

route to Buxa Duar<sup>lxxvi</sup> in Bengal. <sup>lxxvii</sup> His benefactor knew Prana Narayan (Pem Narayan according to Bhutanese sources) (1633-1665), the Raja of Cooch Bihar, and informed him that the *Zhabs drung* was in Chapcha. The Raja replied by sending the *Zhabs drung* a letter and gifts: silver trumpets, ivory, gold and silver coins and cloth. This is the first report of coins from Cooch Bihar reaching Bhutan.<sup>lxxviii</sup>

To express his thanks, the *Zhabs drung* sent a friendly letter and gifts, including amulets, silk and Tibetan horses with saddles to the Raja. Later the *Zhabs drung* wrote to Prana Narayan asking him to convert to Buddhism. The Raja replied by sending him a volume of the *Prajnaparamita* composed in 8000 verses (*brGyad stong pa*) written on palm leaves. The Bhutanese obtained the right to raise taxes in a part of the territory of Cooch Bihar along their frontier near Buxa Duar.<sup>lxxix</sup>

From this date the two states had close relations. When Tenzin Rabgye was appointed the 4<sup>th</sup> Temporal Ruler (*sDe srid*) of Bhutan in 1680, an emissary of the daughter of the late Raja Prana Narayan was present at the ceremony and presented 700 gold coins and 1000 silver coins.<sup>lxxx</sup>

In 1682, Mahendra Narayan, the Raja of Cooch Bihar and great grandson of Prana Narayan, appealed for Bhutanese military aid to fight a Mughal expedition. This expedition had been launched by Aurangzeb who wanted to impose a tax on the small states of Bengal to finance his military campaign in the Deccan. Tenzin Rabgye sent two small detachments commanded by Zhidar, the "Chief of the Guests" (*mGron gnyer*) of the Paro dzong and Trinley Lhungrub, the chief of the Dalingkha dzong. It was at that time that a permanent Bhutanese representative, the Gya Pchila (*rGya spyi bla*), was posted in Cooch Bihar to look after Bhutanese interests.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

The Mughal army routed the Cooch Bihar forces, which led to a conflict between the two branches of the Cooch Bihar

royal family. The Bhutanese found themselves involved and it was in their interest to support the ruling branch. However, their representative, Chamberlain (*gZims dpon*) Norbu drung, made an unsuccessful attempt to mediate between the two factions. Then the Bhutanese government sent a military detachment to support the ruling family.<sup>lxxxii</sup> But this action proved to be of no use as the Raja of Cooch Bihar had to submit to the Mughals again in 1685.

However, these events show that Cooch Bihar and Bhutan had some political interaction and that both the branches of the royal family considered Bhutan as a potential ally. This view was confirmed in 1690 when Prince Rupa Narayan (1695-1715) of a collateral branch visited Bhutan and was officially received by Tenzin Rabgye at the Tashichhodzong fortress<sup>lxxxiii</sup> in Thimphu. Presents comprising gold, silver, silk and horses were exchanged on this occasion. Rupa Narayan ascended to the throne in 1695 and the good relations between the two countries continued in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They were further accentuated by the fact that coins from Cooch Bihar circulated in Bhutan and that Cooch Bihar minted coins for Bhutan, for which it took a commission. However, it is not yet known when the Bhutanese started having their coins minted in Cooch Bihar by sending silver ingots there.

This practice, which existed in 1785<sup>lxxxiv</sup>, continued till 1789, when the British closed the Cooch Bihar mint. In 1783 S. Turner mentioned<sup>lxxxv</sup> the "commodiousness of this small piece (the narainee, a base silver coin), the profits the people of Bhutan derive from their commerce with Cooch Bihar". The coins minted in Cooch Bihar didn't have a true monetary value in an economy based essentially on barter, but they were among the objects gifted by the Bhutanese rulers during the distribution of gifts (*man 'gyed*) to lay persons and monks. One such example is the distribution of 47,000 silver coins to all Bhutanese who paid taxes, officials, monks and soldiers during the enthronement of the *Zhabs drung* Jigme Dragpa in 1747.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

Since the 1650's Cooch Bihar had suffered revenue losses when the Malla kings of the Kathmandu valley had imposed themselves by force as the exclusive intermediaries for trade between Tibet and India. All merchandise had to compulsorily pass by the Kirong-Kathmandu or Kuti-Kathmandu routes.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Cooch Bihar had therefore all the more reasons to stay on good terms with Bhutan, with which it could continue to trade and obtain certain goods from Tibet.

It was also in the interest of Bhutan which, as we have seen, collected taxes in certain parts of Cooch Bihar, and which considered Cooch Bihar as a market for her products, to nurture these relations. An example, among others, is that of Sherab Wangchuk, the 13<sup>th</sup> Temporal Ruler (*sDe srid*) (r.1744-1763), whose generosity is known of from other sources, gave gifts, particularly cloth, horses and musk regularly to the Cooch Bihar royal family as well as the chieftains along the frontier.<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

The products that Bhutan imported or exported transited mostly through Cooch Bihar, and through the town of Rangpur, which is in present day Bangladesh. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Rangpur was the destination of the grand annual caravan, which came from western Bhutan. The most used entry point to Bhutan was Buxa Duar (Pasakha). During the time of the 13<sup>th</sup> Temporal Ruler Sherab Wangchuk cloth formed a large part of the imports (Benaras silk, cotton, English flannel) and exports (Tibetan wool, Chinese silk, Bhutanese cloth).<sup>lxxxix</sup> Horses, lac (*Laccifer lacca*), madder used for dyeing, ivory, musk, gold dust, silver, amber, spices and tobacco (even though it was theoretically prohibited by the Law Code of 1729<sup>xc</sup>) were also traded.

J.B Tavernier, a Frenchman who spent few years (1752-1765) roaming the region before becoming the governor of the French establishment of Chandernagor near Calcutta, was offered a small land in Cooch Bihar and built an earthen and bamboo fort a few miles south of Jaipalguri in

1757.<sup>xc1</sup> From there, he noted the presence of the Bhutanese coming to acquire salt. He also tried, without success, to trade with Bhutan. He remarked on the pinewood from Bhutan, which would have made great masts for ships, the fine woolen products, the aloe wood<sup>xcii</sup>, and especially on the quality of the musk. However, he deplored that the Bhutanese did not hunt the musk deer enough to generate a good trade.<sup>xciii</sup>

The French presence in this area was felt mostly through the Arcot rupees from which the Narayaini coins were made and, according to Rhodes, some Arcot rupees can still be found in Bhutan and Cooch Bihar.<sup>xciv</sup>

During the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Bhutan became more and more involved and influential in Cooch Bihar affairs. In 1770 the king Dhairyendra Narayan (1765-1770 & 1775-1783) who had displeased the Bhutanese was deposed and taken prisoner to Punakha. The Bhutanese installed their own protege Rajendra Narayan on the throne but he died two years later. Upon his death, the Bhutanese installed Dharendra Narayan on the throne but this angered many at the Cooch Bihar court.

The anti-Bhutanese faction who considered Dhairyendra Narayan as a rightful heir, asked the assistance of the British, who seized the occasion to reinforce their domination over the region. Indeed, for the British, Cooch Bihar was technically under their dependency as the East India Company had governed Bengal since 1765.<sup>xcv</sup> A military detachment, which was sent to Cooch Bihar, defeated the Bhutanese and in 1774 Dharyendra Narayan was released by Bhutan. Cooch Bihar passed under British sovereignty. Dharendra Narayan remained on the throne but died in 1775 and was replaced by Dharyendra Narayan.

It is therefore in 1773 that Cooch Bihar disappeared effectively as a state and the Bhutanese found themselves face to face with the British. A period marked by acrimony

and punctuated with skirmishes and wars settled over Bhutanese-British relationships which did not improve until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Kamarupa / Kamrup (Assam)**

The exchanges with this region allowed Bhutan to have access to raw material and technical know-how which she imported and transformed for her own use, as well as goods from Burma and Yunnan.

Kamarupa, or Kamrup, on the south-eastern border of Bhutan was a famous and prosperous kingdom since a long time and, in fact, included what would become Cooch Bihar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Inscriptions dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries indicate that agricultural products, specially the areca nut (*tambula*; latin *Areca catechu*) and betel (*pan*; Latin: *Piper betel*) were commonly traded and they would later become a favourite of the Bhutanese.<sup>xcvi</sup> The cultivation of silk worms was also common.<sup>xcvii</sup> The silk produced was mainly for local consumption. However, a part of the produce was exported and a small quantity reached eastern Bhutan, as is the case today.

Lahiri wrote: "From very ancient times, Kamarupa was noted for her textiles, sandal and *agaru* (Aloe trees) and it seems likely that there was a route, although no archaeological evidence is available, between Kamarupa and Pundravardhana (North Bengal) along which these commodities were taken to the main business centres in Northern India. It is also possible that the route did not terminate at Kamarupa, but may have extended eastwards to South China through the hills of Assam or Manipur and Upper Burma".<sup>xcviii</sup>

The Ahoms defeated the Kamarupa in 1228. The Ahoms were Shans, a branch of Thais who came from Yunnan

through Burma. They gave their name, which became Assam, to this part of the Indian sub-continent, but the part of Assam to the south of the border with Bhutan retained the name Kamarupa, which was later abbreviated to Kamrup.

Kamarupa was on the trading route between south-west China and India. Even though the existence of this route seems well established, its importance as a trading route and its age are controversial. Lahiri writes "There is nothing to suggest that this route was in vogue in the late centuries BC or the early centuries AD [...] Clear historical light on this route is available for the first time in the 7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD when Hieun Tsang and Jia Dan wrote their records".<sup>xix</sup>

Hieun Tsang, the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who visited what he called Ka-ma lu-po learnt from the people of Kamarupa that the south-west borders of Sichuan " were distant about two months journey, but the mountains and rivers were hard to pass, there were pestilential vapours and poisonous snakes and herbs".<sup>c</sup> The route existed and was known but was less than engaging!

In an earlier article Liebenthal affirms that a route; the "Tsang-k'ö route" existed before the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD: "Before 644, perhaps already much earlier, there existed a route leading into north-eastern Assam (Kamarupa) from Shu (Szechuan). It began in the Yun-ch'ang district and led north to the frontier which was always formed by the Chin-sha-chiang (the upper Yangtse river). Then it led west, perhaps through the Shih-men pass into Po-nan, on the western side of the Mekong. Further west, it must have passed the Namkin range before descending into the Brahamaputra valley near modern Sadiya [east Assam]".<sup>ci</sup> However, Liebenthal added: "Pilgrims to the holy places of Buddhism therefore tried to bypass Tibet in the south. They succeeded in some cases, but the Tsang-k'ö route never became a trade route".<sup>cii</sup>



Lahiri makes the same remarks, based, among others sources, on more recent documents: "For an insight into the natures of routes and the mechanism of trade contact through them, we have sifted some British records of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is, of course, a clear picture of routes in these records but the routes by themselves do not suggest significant contact and trade. These routes were not always used for regular commercial traffic, and although there was a certain amount of interchange of goods throughout this region, this was achieved through a system of inter-community barter".<sup>ciii</sup>

Even though it was short, and its existence confirmed by Chinese travellers in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, this route does not appear to have developed as an important commercial axis because of its natural difficulties. However, it is certain that a certain amount of merchandise was exchanged between the two countries via Burma by inter-community barter as well as by long distance caravans, through the initiative of enterprising merchants. As for the techniques of silk production, it propagated along this route from south-east China to north-east India at the beginning of the Christian era.<sup>civ</sup>

Centuries later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when maritime trade was well established between Calcutta and China, this route was still being used: "Assamese merchants also went to Yunnan in China by the line of trade through Sadiya, Bisa and across the Patkoi range of mountains, and through the Hukong valley to the town of Munkong from where they ascended by the Irrawady to a place called Catmow. The goods were disembarked at Catmow from where they were conveyed on mules over a range of mountainous country inhabited by the Shans into the Chinese province of Yunnan".<sup>cv</sup>

Regional trade was very active as Captain Welsh who led a British military expedition to Assam (1792- 1794) reports. A list of merchandise drawn up by this officer in 1794

indicates that exports of the mountainous regions of Assam existed: "From the eastern confines of Sadiya, there were cotton, copper, spring salt and Agar (Aloe wood); from the southern confines, the Nagas brought cotton, luckibilla (a silk cloth), toat-bound (a silk cloth), and Kapor (embroidered silk cloth)".<sup>cvi</sup>

It is known that the Kapor; the "Kavach Kapor", was a cloth used as a talisman-cloth by Ahom warriors when they went to war.<sup>cvi</sup> The term "Kapor" is probably the same as "Kapur", used in eastern Bhutan to designate a raw silk cloth with supplementary-warp threads.

The Indian Marwari merchants were already present in this region of Upper Assam in 1838 and very active, as Captain Pemberton remarked in his *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*: "[There were] Merwaree merchants from the western extremity of India at Sadiya. These merchants imported broadcloth, muslin, longcloth, coloured handkerchiefs, chintzes, and various other kinds of cloths, salt and opium, liquor, glass and crockery ware, tobacco, betel nut and rice for the troops".<sup>cvi</sup>

Another route also contributed to commercial exchanges in the region: the Mon yul corridor. It was the shortest route linking the south of Tibet to the Assam plains. It passed through Tshona dzong (mTsho sna rdzong) and Tawang (rTa dbang) to the east of Bhutan.<sup>cix</sup>

This sketch of trade routes in north-east India allows to visualise the age old exchanges and the commercial context which the Bhutanese found in this region. Although they were quite isolated by the mountains, which made access to the plains difficult, this did not prevent them from reaching the plains. Historical sources attest to ancient relations, which existed between eastern Bhutan and Assam. This Bhutanese source is the "Gyalrig" (*rGyal rigs*) written by the historian monk Ngawang in 1728 who relates the ancient history of eastern Bhutan.

According to this text it appears that on numerous occasions clan chieftains from eastern Bhutan, and particularly the Wang ma clan, whose land holdings are listed, had fiscal and survey rights on the Assam Duars.<sup>cx</sup> The dates are not very precise but could go as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This implies that products from Assam, particularly textiles arrived in Bhutan in relatively ancient times. The "Gyelrig" even mentions a place, which seemed to be in eastern Bhutan, where a market had been established: "A market was established at Bhumpayer and the Atsaras of India, the Tibetans, the Khampas and all the people of Monyul gathered there".<sup>cx1</sup>

Other than the political links, which existed between the chieftains of eastern Bhutan and Assam, some Bhutanese travelled to Assam for religious and commercial reasons, the two being often combined. The people from the east used to go on pilgrimage to Assam in winter. Hajo, near Gauhati on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra was and still is a Buddhist pilgrimage site, which, according to local belief, is Kusinagara, the site of Buddha's historical "death". It is interesting to note that the site was opened apparently at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Ngarig Gyelpo, a chieftain of eastern Bhutan and his religious master. The "Gyelrig" explains that "the Lama Tashi Wang and the chief of the Yodung wang ma clan, both of whom were patron and chaplain, opened the route to the sacred sanctuary of Kusinagara, in India, in such a way that in our days it is the meeting place of pilgrims from India, Tibet, Hots and Khams and (of all the regions) below Toe Ngari (western Tibet)".<sup>cxii</sup>

As for the site of Singri (Shing ghi ri), thirty kilometres to the west of Tezpur in Upper Assam and mentioned by the great master Jigme Lingpa in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>cxiii</sup>, it was a pilgrimage site for Tibetans and Bhutanese at least since the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>cxiv</sup>

Hajo was from the 17<sup>th</sup> century a thriving pilgrimage and trading place in Assam. The town was holy for the Hindus,

the Muslims and the Buddhists, which gave it a cosmopolitan population. The Muslims practised metal casting and the nearby town of Sualkuchi became an important centre of silk trade.<sup>cxv</sup>

Trade, linked among others, to pilgrimage, was active because in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>cxvi</sup> "a person called the Wazir Barua, of the Kalita family, had a hereditary charge of the intercourse with Bhutan. He lived at Siliambari, one day's journey north from the house of the Darang Raja. He had some lands, and paid nothing to the king except presents. All the messengers and traders of Bhutan, all servants of the Deva Raja (Temporal ruler of Bhutan), must first go to Siliambari. The Barua there levied no duties, but received presents in order to prevent his throwing impediments in the way of business, and no one was allowed to purchase at Siliambari without employing him as a broker. The Bhutias [= Bhutanese] were allowed to take a part of their goods for disposal to Hajo which they visited every winter, being a place of sacred pilgrimage".

Speaking of trade between Assam and the neighbouring countries, including Bhutan, Bogle wrote in 1775 that "the Bhutanese, the inhabitants of the country of the Gorkha Rajah [Nepal], the people of Lhasa, and those of several other countries located to the north west of the Brahamaputra carried out uninterrupted trade with Assam" <sup>cxvii</sup>, and he mentioned particularly the gold of Tibetan origin brought by the Bhutanese.<sup>cxviii</sup>

During their pilgrimages the Bhutanese traded with locals and imported products in the different markets of Assam: Sadya, Barhat, Odalguri, Daranga, Siliambari. The east Bhutan-Assam axis was particularly important for the trade of cloth, with exchanges based on cotton, silk and dyes. It is known that at a fair in Assam in 1875<sup>cxix</sup>, the Bhutanese exchanged woollen blankets, madder, bags and more than four tonnes of lac for cotton and raw Assamese silk textiles.

The raw material used for making textiles were woven and the motifs were adapted to Bhutanese tastes. It is probable that Assam had a decisive technical and stylistic influence on Bhutan. Spinning and weaving was widespread in Assam as is reported in 1897: "From times immemorial the inhabitants of this province have spun cotton thread and woven cotton. Weaving among the Assamese forms a part of a girl's education and part of a woman's ordinary household duties".<sup>cxx</sup> As in Bhutan, weaving is a prestigious activity in Assamese society where an experienced weaver is respected and admired even today.<sup>cxxi</sup> Dyeing was also widespread in Assam and the technique is the same in Bhutan. It consisted of dyeing the threads and not the whole cloth once it had been woven. The dyes were obtained from wild plants, which were boiled in cauldrons to obtain the colour in which the threads were soaked.

Assam was a great producer of the famous *lac* or shellac (*Laccifer lacca*) which gave much prized red colour. For example, in 1808, 10,000 *maunds*<sup>cxxii</sup> of lac, valued at Rupees thirty five thousand, were exported to Bengal.<sup>cxxiii</sup> It must be from Assam that the eastern Bhutanese imported the technique of using the secretion of this insect, which also lived in their region, to produce lac. It was called "gyatsho" (*rgya tshos*) in Bhutan and the translation of its name indicates its origin as it means "colour/dye of India". The method used to collect the lac was the same as in Assam.

One particular population, the Kacharis, also called the Bodos in Assam and the Meches in west Bengal<sup>cxxiv</sup>, had close contacts with the Bhutanese because of their geographical position. The Bodos settled down in a stretch of land just to the south of what became the border of Bhutan in a region called the Duars of Assam by the British. The Bodos were very active in the cultivation of silk worms from which they obtained a raw silk called *Endi*. The Bodo women spent a large part of their day weaving on a dorsal strap loom. The other members of the family carried out domestic

tasks for them. A good weaver could weave half a yard per day and the price obtained for the cloth contributed significantly to the family economy.<sup>cxxv</sup> This silk was prized for its softness, solidity and warmth. When the Duars were under Bhutanese jurisdiction in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and till 1865, the Bodos paid their taxes to the Bhutanese government in grain and cloth. They manufactured two types of textiles, the *kharu* and the *dunko lepa* especially for Bhutan.<sup>cxxvi</sup> The remarks of Bogle in 1775 on the Duars applied to Bodo products<sup>cxxvii</sup>: "where the land is cultivated, it produced rice, mustard seeds, tobacco, a bit of opium and about 40,000 *maunds* of fine cotton per year; to the east it produced black pepper and *munga* silk (Latin: *Anthera assama*)".

### **A Pawn on the Regional Chessboard**

From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and George Bogle's mission, the reports of British officials who travelled in the region provide more and more precise details on the trade between Bhutan and her southern neighbours. This interest was due to several reasons: on one hand, the East India Company was the ruler of the region; on the other hand, the trading conditions between Tibet and her southern neighbours had changed. It must be recalled that the kingdoms of the Kathmandu valley were the exclusive intermediaries for trade with Tibet. However, in 1769 the Malla dynasty was defeated by the Gurkha dynasty who evicted the Indian merchants from the Kathmandu valley and decided that the Nepali routes would be reserved for Nepali traders.<sup>cxxviii</sup> Thus the route from central Tibet to Bengal through Bhutan, which was the most direct, became important for commercial exchanges.

Bogle wrote in 1774 that "the annual caravan which goes from here [Bhutan] to Rangpur is first of all the business of the Deb Rajah<sup>cxxix</sup>, his ministers and provincial governors. Each of them sent an agent with his *tanyar*<sup>cxxx</sup>, musk yak tails, rough red blankets or half-yard wide striped woollen

cloth. The other Bhutanese travelled under their protection. Almost all the goods they brought back in return – mainly fine woollen cloth, spices, dyes, Malda<sup>cxxxii</sup> fabrics – goes to the country of the Teshu Lama<sup>cxxxii</sup>, either as a tribute or for trade. In the latter case they were exchanged for *pelong* scarves, flower printed satins, tea, salt, wool etc".<sup>cxxxiii</sup>

For Bogle, preoccupied with British interests, Bhutan was of no interest except as a centre and the route for Tibet-Bengal trade. Its importance as a trading partner was insignificant. He noted in a realistic manner that Bhutan was not an outlet for products from Bengal.<sup>cxxxiv</sup>

In 1783, Captain Turner noted while crossing Cooch Bihar on his way to Bhutan<sup>cxxxv</sup>: "Coarse cotton cloths I understand to be the staple commodity, and that they furnish the most considerable part of the large returning cargo, which is carried by the Bootea caravan annually from Rungpore".

Thus, at that time, Rangpur was the most important commercial centre for the Bhutanese who arrived there in February and March and left before the monsoons in May-June.

In 1794 Captain Welsh<sup>cxxxvi</sup> gave us the same list of imports from Bhutan. They consisted of musk, woollen blankets, yak tails (used as fly swatters), small horses, borax, rock salt, *nainta* (a type of cloth), *goom sing* (a brocaded cloth), and *doroka* (a green, red and yellow coloured silk).

Kishen Kant Bose, who travelled in the western part of Bhutan in 1815 lists the products exchanged: "Bootan produces abundant Tangun horses, blankets, walnuts, musk, chowries or cow tails, oranges and manjeet (madder) which the inhabitants sell at Rungpore; and thence take back woollen cloth, pattus (?) indigo, red sandal, asafoetida, nutmegs, cloves, nakhi, and coarse broad cloths. From the lowlands under the Hills and the borders of Rungpore and

Cooch Bihar, they import swine, cattle, paan and betel, tobacco, dried fish and coarse broad cloth".<sup>cxxxvii</sup>

In his turn, Captain Pemberton who crossed Bhutan from the east to the west in 1838 commented on the state of the Bhutanese economy, and once again noted the importance of products from the plains: "The wealth of the country consists almost entirely in the cotton cloths, silk and grain, drawn from the Dooars in the plains".<sup>cxxxviii</sup> He mentioned also that "coarse cotton cloths are made by the villagers inhabiting the southern portion of the country above the Duars".<sup>cxxxix</sup>

According to Pemberton, Bhutan imported cotton cloth, silk, dried fish and rice from Assam, flannel and corals from Bengal. These merchandises were then partly exported to Tibet, from where Bhutan imported salt, musk, silk, tea, gold and woollen blankets.<sup>cxl</sup> A part of these merchandises served as currency for exchange of products from Bengal and Assam.

In 1905 White wrote that during his visit to the residence of Tongsa Penlop (*Krong gsar dPon slob*) in Bumthang, many young girls wove cotton cloth, but particularly silk cloth, and the threads came from Assam.<sup>cxli</sup> J.C. White also noted in 1906 that "there is a great deal of stick lac grown in the valley of Tashigong"<sup>cxlii</sup> and that is was, along with madder, a source of export towards Tibet. The two substances, the first of animal and the second of vegetal origin, which were used to dye cloth red were, and still are today, exported to Assam, but on a small scale.

Between the years 1920 and 1950 Nepali traders, the Nyishangbas, also known as "Manangis" carried out lucrative trade between Nepal, Calcutta, Assam the border of Bhutan and vice versa. These enterprising businessmen contributed to the exchanges in the region, particularly that of cloth and dyes. Van Spengen described their trading: "Proceeding northeastward by train (from Calcutta) into Assam, a whole range of small and medium-sized towns came within reach of the Nyishangbas, where they sold a variety of commodities to



the local population. In this way, the Assamese towns of Dhubri, Gauhati, Nowgong, Dimapur and Tinsukia were visited regularly between January and March each year. Here the Nyishangbas sold their Calcutta produced wares like needles, safety-pins and synthetic dyes, and to spread the risks involved, quantities of corals and imitation stones [...]. The dyes were sought after up to the Bhutanese border where the better *anday* was produced. Here Tibetan Dupka [Bhutanese] visited the Bhutan *mela* (fair) along the Indian border, selling herbs and musk to the occasional Nyishangba trader [...] The Nyishangba women searched the Bhutan *mela* for wool which they converted to mufflers and blankets".<sup>cxliiii</sup> Towards the end of the 1940's these traders entered the interiors of Bhutan to bypass the middlemen and to access simples (medicinal plants) and musk. They went till Deothang (bDe wa thang) and Tashigang (bKra shis sgang) in eastern Bhutan, where they exchanged cloth, dyes, and imitation stones.

The importance that these exchanges with Assam represented for Bhutan, specially the east, is still reflected today by the toponymy. A market called "Godama" exists at the border. In fact, this name is a deformation of the English word "godown", which designates the warehouses used to stock merchandise.

According to these reports, it appears that, far from being an inward looking country, Bhutan had well established commercial relations with Cooch Bihar and Assam, which can be dated to before the arrival of the British in these regions at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Through local markets in north-east India, which since centuries had often been at the crossroads of different trading routes, the Bhutanese had come into contact with products from other regions. Bhutan was also known as a potential, though limited, market by foreign traders. But, in fact, it is her easy access to Tibet which made Bhutan interesting for the British from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, from the 1880's, the British seemed to be suddenly disinterested by Bhutanese trade routes to Tibet.

Without trying to explain this disinterest solely by commercial reasons, it must be noted that the railway from Calcutta to Darjeeling through the Bengal plains was constructed in 1882. Thus Kalimpong, Sikkim and the Chumbi valley offered the fastest and most direct access to Central Tibet. The desire to set up trade links with Tibet was one of the main reasons for the military expedition led by Colonel Younghusband in 1904. It led to the establishment of British trading posts at Gyantse (rGyal rtse) and Yatung (Shar sing ma) in Tibet.

This Bhutan-Tibet trading routes, complementary to the Bhutan-Bengal/Assam routes, should be examined<sup>cxliv</sup> in order to have a more complete and accurate picture of the trading exchange network in this region.

### **Transliteration of Persons and Place Names as They Appear in the Article**

For research purposes, the personal names have been kept in transliteration in the notes and bibliography.

Ngawang Namgyal = Ngag dbang rnam rgyal

Darchug Gyeltshen = Dar phyug rgyal mtshan

Chapcha = sKyabs kra

Tenzin Rabgye = bsTan 'dzin rabs rgyas

Zhidar = bZhi dar

Trinley Lhungrub = 'Phrin las lhun grub

Norbu Drung = Nor bu drung

Paro = sPa gro

Dalingkha = brDa gling kha.

Tashichhodzong = bKra shis chos rdzong

Jigme Dragpa = 'Jigs med grags pa

Sherab Wangchuk = Shes rab dbang phyug

Ngawang = Ngag dbang

Ngarig Gyelpo = lNga rigs rgyal po

Tashi Wang = bKra shis wang

Toe Ngari = sTod mNga' ris

Jigme Lingpa = 'Jigs med gling pa

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *dPal 'Brug pa rin che mthu chen Ngag gi dbang po'i bka' khrims phygos thams cad las rnam par rgyal ba'I gtam*, "Law Code" written by bsTan 'dzin chos rgyal, 10<sup>th</sup> *rJe mkhan po*, Folio 109b translated by Aris 1986 : 149.

<sup>1</sup> Also spelt Cooch Behar, Koch Bihar. The name Koch comes from the dynasty who seized power in this region at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Koch dynasty was originally Bodos from Bihar who had converted to hinduism and claimed to descend from Shiva. Cf. Jacquesson 1999 : 232 and Nath 1989.

<sup>1</sup> Rhodes 1999 : 2-4.

<sup>1</sup> Rhodes 1999 : 15.

<sup>1</sup> Buxa Duar is called Pasakha (*dPag bsam kha*) by the Bhutanese.

<sup>1</sup> Aris 1979 : 214, and *Lho'i chos 'byung*, folio 28a-b.

<sup>1</sup> Rhodes, personal letter dated 2<sup>nd</sup> February 98.

<sup>1</sup> *mTshungs med chos kyi rgyal po rje rin po che'I rnam par thar pa bskal bzang legs bris 'dod pa'I re skong dpag bsam gyi snye ma*, biography of bsTan 'dzin rab rgyas, written by Ngag dbang lhun grub (1670-1730), 6<sup>th</sup> *rJe mkhan po*, rTa mgo, folio 161b-162a and Ardussi 1977 : 390.

<sup>1</sup> *Op Cit.* biography of bsTan 'dzin rab rgyas, folio 127b and Ardussi 1977: 368.

<sup>1</sup> *Op Cit.* biography of bsTan 'dzin rab rgyas, folio 149a and b and Ardussi 1977: 389.

<sup>1</sup> *Op Cit.* biography of bsTan 'dzin rab rgyas, folio 161b-162a and Ardussi 1977: 390.

<sup>1</sup> *Op Cit.* biography of bsTan 'dzin rab rgyas, folio 231b-232a and Ardussi 1977: 390.

<sup>1</sup> Rhodes 1977: 3 citing the "Calendar of Persian Correspondence", vol . VI, n° 1583.

<sup>1</sup> Turner 1971: 143.

<sup>1</sup> *Op cit.*, biography of Shes rab dbang phyung, folio 30b-40a and Ardussi 1977: 507.

<sup>1</sup> Boulnois 1997: 171-172.

<sup>1</sup> *Chos rgyal chen po Shes rab dbang phyug gi dge ba'I cho ga rab tu gsal ba'I gtam mu tig do shal*, biography of Shes rab dbang phyug, written by Yon tan mtha' yas, 13<sup>th</sup> *rJe mkhan po* (1724-1783), folio 84a-b and Ardussi 1977: 519. cf. also Mynak Tulku : 1997.

<sup>1</sup> Aris 1994: 39-40. Cf also Mynak Tulku: 1997.

<sup>1</sup> *Op cit.* , "Law Code", folio 107a translated by Aris 1986 : 141.

<sup>1</sup> This fort was called Fort Bourgogne. Deloche 1984 : 48.

<sup>1</sup> Latin: *Aquilaria gallocha*.

<sup>1</sup> Deloche 1984 : 135-136.

- <sup>1</sup> Rhodes 1999 : 25.
- <sup>1</sup> Boulnois 1996: 16.
- <sup>1</sup> Pommaret 2000.
- <sup>1</sup> Lahiri 1991: 97.
- <sup>1</sup> Lahiri 1991: 134.
- <sup>1</sup> Lahiri 1991: 163-164.
- <sup>1</sup> Jacquesson 1999 : 221 quoting Watters 1904.
- <sup>1</sup> Liebenthal 1956: 11-12.
- <sup>1</sup> Liebenthal 1956: 15.
- <sup>1</sup> Lahiri 1991: 165.
- <sup>1</sup> Liu 1991: 69.
- <sup>1</sup> Basu 1970: 190.
- <sup>1</sup> Basu 1970: 186 and 190.
- <sup>1</sup> Das 1985: 230.
- <sup>1</sup> Lahiri 1991: 135.
- <sup>1</sup> The subject has been briefly addressed in Myers and Pommaret 1994: 47-69.
- <sup>1</sup> This term designates "Gates", viz. the plains regions which allowed access to the eastern Himalayas. There are 18 Duars from Bengal to Assam.
- <sup>1</sup> Aris 1986: 71, citing the *rGyal rigs*, folio 49b.
- <sup>1</sup> Aris 1986: 71, citing the *rGyal rigs*, folio 50a.
- <sup>1</sup> Aris 1995: 17 and 66 n. 15.
- <sup>1</sup> Aris 1979: 113 and 188.
- <sup>1</sup> Jacquesson 1999 : 254-255.
- <sup>1</sup> Basu 1970: 192.
- <sup>1</sup> Bogle 1996: 80.
- <sup>1</sup> Bogle 1996: 82.
- <sup>1</sup> Hunter n.d.: 1, 144.
- <sup>1</sup> Basu 1970: 162, citing a *Monograph on the Cotton fabrics of Assam*, 1897.
- <sup>1</sup> Das 1985: 229.
- <sup>1</sup> The *maund* is an anglo-indian measure of weight whose value varied from region to region, but was generally 82 pounds. *Hobson-Jobson* 1968: 563-564.
- <sup>1</sup> Basu 1970: 187.
- <sup>1</sup> This Mongoloid population which must have arrived from the east among the first waves of immigration into Assam is perhaps related to the Garos of the Shillong region.
- <sup>1</sup> Endle 1990: 21-22.
- <sup>1</sup> Hunter n.d.: 1, 144.
- <sup>1</sup> Bogle 1996: 77.
- <sup>1</sup> Bogle 1996: 207.

<sup>1</sup> term used by the English to designate the Temporal Chief of Bhutan, the Desi (*sDe srid*).

<sup>1</sup> small horses.

<sup>1</sup> A town in north Bengal.

<sup>1</sup> Title used by the English to designate the Panchen Lama in Tibet. The word "Teshu" is a deformation of Tashi (*bKra shis*) which referred to the monastery of Tashilunpo (*bKra shis lun po*), near Shigatsé (*gZhis ka rtse*), where the Panchen lama lived.

<sup>1</sup> Bogle 1996: 73-74.

<sup>1</sup> Bogle 1996: 207.

<sup>1</sup> Turner 1971: 7-8.

<sup>1</sup> Basu 1970: 190.

<sup>1</sup> Bose 1972: 350.

<sup>1</sup> Pemberton 1976: 34.

<sup>1</sup> Pemberton 1976: 45.

<sup>1</sup> Pemberton 1976: 46.

<sup>1</sup> White 1971: 164.

<sup>1</sup> White 1971: 190 and 201.

<sup>1</sup> Van Spengen 2000: 181-182.

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary study of the Bhutanese trading network was carried out by Myers and Pommaret 1994: 47-69.

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