COOCH BEHAR AND BHUTAN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TIBETAN TRADE

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Cooch Behar[1] or the "land of the Koches" once formed part of the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa. It was so named after the Koches had established their political predominance under Biswa Singh in the earlier half of the sixteenth century. The English merchant and traveller Ralph Fitch arrived at Cooch Behar in 1583 and wrote about her trade relation with the distant lands of Tibet, China, Tartary and Muscovia[2]. Among items of trade Fitch mentions musks, blankets, turquoise (agates), silk, pepper and "saffron of Persia". Fitch did not enter the Bhutan hills but his description evidently shows the commerical importance of the route from Tashilhunpo through the Paro Penlop's territory to Buxa and Chamurchi north of Rangpur. Markham takes this description as a "correct account of the intercourse which then prevailed between India and Tibet though the passes of Bhutan and through Nepal"[3].

Cacella and Cabral, who were the first Europeans to penetrate the mountains of Bhutan in 1626, throw light on Bhutan's trade not only with the plains of Bengal and Assam but also with Tibet and China.Cacella noted that in those days Hajo (Ajo) in Assam was very "populous and rich". One factor which explains the importance and prosperity of Hajo was that it was at the terminal of two important trade routes through the Manas Valley and Towang. The latter did not pass through Bhutanese

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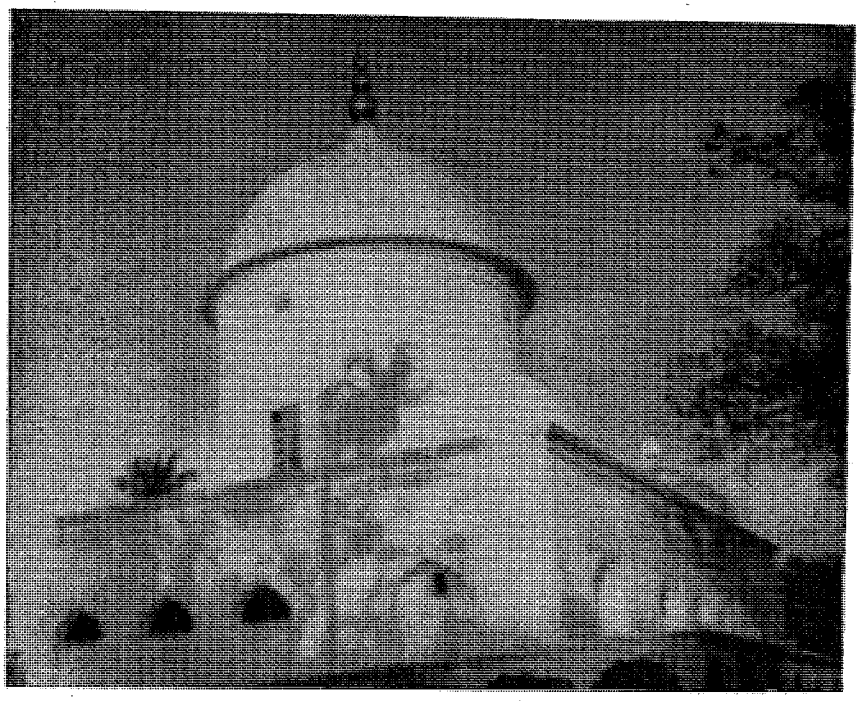
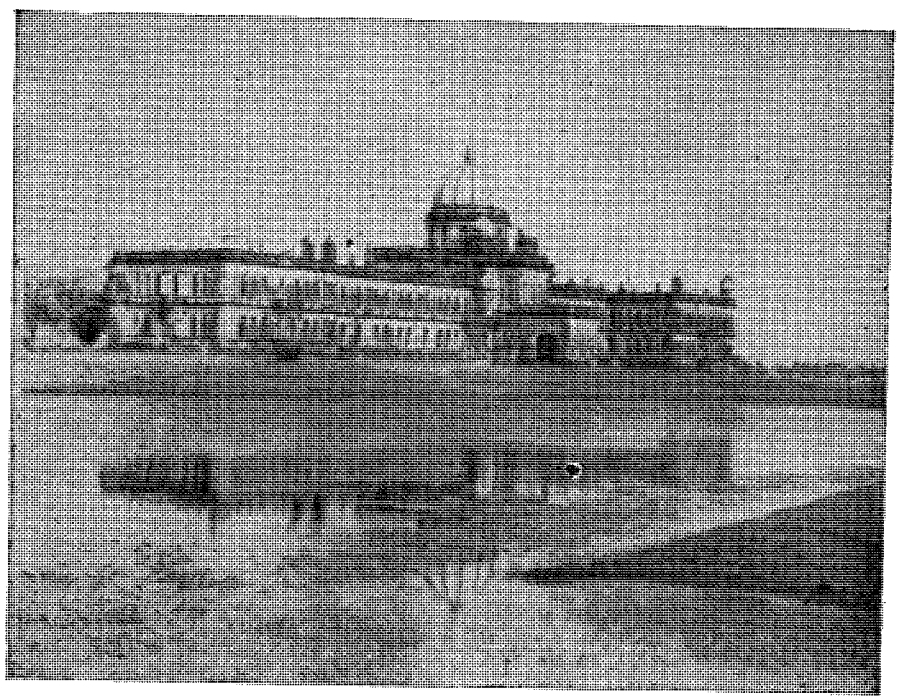
1. *The state of Cooch Behar was ceded by its ruler to India under the arrangement known as the Cooch Behar Merger Agreement (Aug. 28, 1949). The state was merged with West Bengal in January, 1950. The present district of Cooch Behar has an area of 1289 Sq. miles. Its northern frontier is about 20 miles south of the Bhutan range of hills. On the east it is bounded by the Goalpara district of Assam. The southern limit is determined by the international boundary between India and Bangladesh. The district forms an "irregular triangle" with mostly artificial boundaries.*

2. *Hakluyt, The Second Volume of Principal Navigators' Voyages, p. 257. London, Anno 1599.*

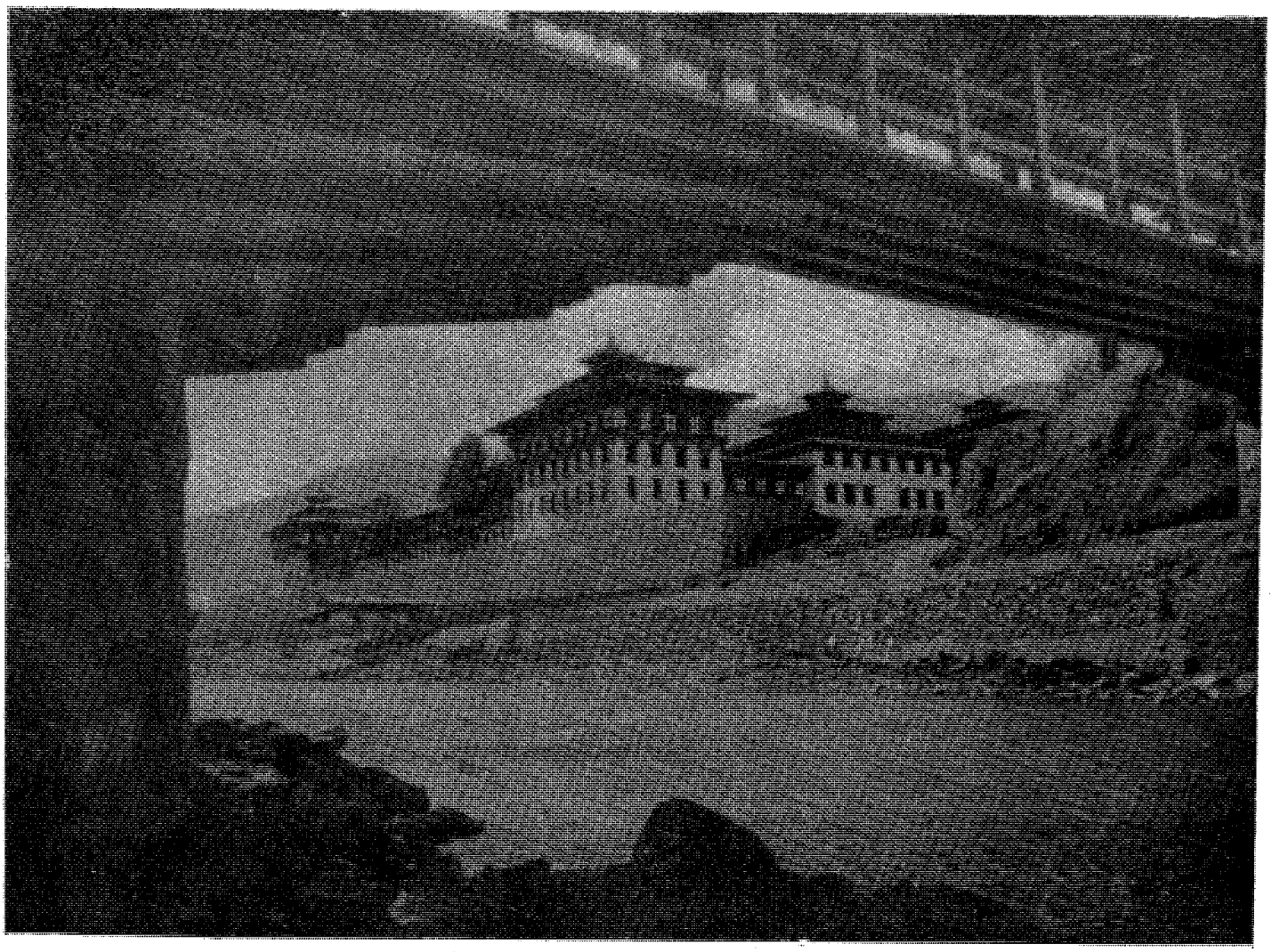
3. *Markham, Clements R. Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa, 1876, Reprinted by Manjusri Publishing House, New Delhi, 1971. introduction, p. liv.*



The Siva Temple at Jalpesh



The Palace at Cooch Behar



Tashichhodzong, Thimpu, Bhutan

territory and was a direct commercial artery with Tibet. Pemberton found (1838) the Khampas of eastern Tibet carrying on traffic along these two routes. In Cacella's description Cooch Behar appears as a flourishing trade mart. The town was "very populous and plentifully provided with things which the country itself possesses and those which came from Patna, Rajmahal and Gaur[4]" . In the 17th century the navigability of the Torsa,which flows past the town of Cooch Behar,has been emphasized by the late H.N.Chaudhuri, one of the official historians of Cooch Behar. Both Hajo and Cooch Behar were undoubtedly focal points of Bhutan's trade with the plains. At the court of the Dharma Raja,the missionaries were entertained with Chinese tea and were lodged in a tent "lined with Chinese silk and adorned with a canopy"[5]. Cacella says that Bhutan was "well provided with Chinese merchandise such as silk, gold and porcelain". It is noticeable that in Turner's list (1783) of the articles of trade flowing from Tibet to Bhutan tea is mentioned as second to gold dust[6], whereas English broadcloth was the first item of Bhutan's export to Tibet.

In the 18th century the route through Bhutan and the Chumbi Valley gained a new importance when the rising Gurkha power in Nepal blocked the passes through Morung and Demijong (Sikkim). The road through Mustang was uneconomical and distant. The disastrous effects of the great famine of 1770 accelerated new commercial ventures in the north. The famine caused "enormous financial losses especially in the export of grain and the cotton industry on which the economy of Bengal so much depended"[7].

In 1771 the court of Directors enquired about the "possibility of the northern trade and of sending explorers to Bhutan and Assam"[8].

By the time of the transference of the Dewani (1765) Bhutan's trade in the plains extended to Rangpur and annual Bhutanese caravans to that place were already ancient custom. Further, the Bhutanese had gained control of large parts of the Western Duars which traditionally belonged to Koch chieftains and made a bid to conquer

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4. *Wessels, C., Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia* 1603-1721, *The Hague,* 1924. *pp.* 127, 128.
5. *Ibid. p.* 138.
6. *Turner, Samuel. Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet, London,* 1800, *reprinted by Manjusri, New Delhi,*1971, *p.* 374.
7. *Cammann, Schuyler. Trade through the Himalayas: The Early Attempts to Open Tibet. Princeton,* 1951 *p,* .25
8. *Sarkar, S. C. "Some Notes on the Intercourse of Bengal with the Northern Countries in the second half of the Eighteenth Century", Bengal Past and Present, Vol. XLI, Jan.-June* 1931, *p.* 121.

Cooch Behar. The Bhutanese king Desi Shidariva (Bogle's Deb Judhur) took prisoner Maharaja Dhairjendra Narayan of Cooch Behar at Buxa in 1770. This incident set in motion a train of events which led to the outbreak of the First Bhutan War (1772-74) and the collision between the Bhutanese and the English.

The merit of Shidariva's project has so far drawn scant attention for the simple reason that it failed. The project envisaged, in the first place, ensuring Bhutanese control of the Western Duars, which in its turn called for holding Cooch Behar. Secondly, the Bhutanese ruler visualised an extension of the Bhutan-Rangpur trade and was anixious for its safety. It appears that in the isolation of his mountain kingdom, Shidariva had not grasped the significance of the cannonade at Plassey (1757) and the transference of the Dewani (1765). He had to pay the price and the Anglo-Cooch Behar treaty of 1772 sealed his fate. Captain Jones won the battle for Cooch Behar and the Bhutanese were driven out. The issue was decided through the resistance of the Sannyasis[9] and the Bhutanese continued in the Duars till 1774.

Petech has shown from the autobiography of Palden Yeshe, the Third Panchen Lama, that the great Lama statesman was urged by the two Nepalese representatives, Braahmcari Bhagirathi and Jayas Ram Thapa, to mediate between the British and the Bhutanese 10. Palden Yeshe's letter was received on 29th March, 1774. It kindled Hasting's imagination of the prospect of commercial relations with Tibet through Bhutan. The Anglo-Bhutan treaty of 1774 which ended the First Bhutan War secured the northern frontier of Bengal against Bhutanese inucursions. Simultaneously it struck up a friendship with the Bhutanese for the promotion of trade with Tibet. Consciously or not, it was the first step to bring the hill kingdom of Bhutan within the periphery of Indian interests. In political acumen Warren Hasting's policy towards Bhutan is unsurpassed in the annals of the North-East Frontier of India. Immediately after the war with Bhutan was over George Bogle led the first British mission to Bhutan and Tibet for a commercial reconaissance. Bogle's letter from Tashichhodzong dated 11th Oct. 1774, shows that the trade between Bhutan and Rangpur was conducted by the Deb Raja and the provincial governors. In return for tangan horses, musk,

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9. *The link-up of the Sannyasis and the Bhutanese in the First Bhutan War has so far been hardly noticed. In British Official records the Sannyasis have been described as "lawless banditti" who levied contributions by violence under pretence of charity. They had great hold over the people in the Duars. They put up a stiff resistance to the expanding British power in the foothills of the Himalayas between the Tista and the Sankos at the end of the Eighteenth Century.*

10. *Petech, L. 'The Missions of Bogle and Turner According to Tibetan Texts', T'oung Pao, VXXXIX, Leiden,*1950, *pp.* 339-340.

cowtails, red blankets and woolen cloth the Bhutanese traders secured broadcloth, spices, dyes and Malda cloth for the Tibetan market. From Tibet the Bhutanese used to import tea, salt and wool in great quantity. The English envoy was hopeful of success with the Deb Raj*s* "unless his dependence upon China should stand in the way"[11]

Regarding Bogle's achievements, Claude White disagrees with Aitchison and says that it would be "unfair" to describe his mission as "unsuccessful". Bogle concluded a treaty with the Raja of Bhutan in May, 1775 at Tashichhodzong which provided for the transit trade of Tibet through Bhutan by means of a native agency besides ensuring expansion of Bhutanese trade with the plains of Bengal. These were remarkable achievements compared with the failure of later missions to Bhutan under R. B. Pemberton (1838) and Ashley Eden (1864). On the retirement of Warren Hastings his style of Trans-Himalayan diplomacy was rejected, and the Sino-Nepalese war of 1792 closed the doors of Tibet to the south.

Forrest wrote: "So completely was the policy of opening commercial intercourse between India and trans-Himalayan regions abandoned that the very history of Has tings's negotiations was forgotten and most of the valuable records of Tibet and Bhutan missions have been lost"[12]

Once British paramountcy was ensured over Cooch Behar (by the Anglo-Cooch Behar Treaty of 1772), Warren Hastings went out of his way to win the "good disposition" of the Bhutanese. His treaty with Bhutan in 1774 illustrates this. A reputed historian of Cooch Behar, Khan Chowdhuri Amanatulla Ahmed, has shown that large tracts of territory belonging to Cooch Behar Raj were transferrd to Bhutan, in many cases without even a survey [13]. The fertile tracts of Maraghat and Chamurchi became a bone of contention between Cooch Behar and Bhutan and alienated these neighbouring states. The most peculiar transaction which sheds light on the character of the commercial diplomacy of the time was the cession Bhutan of the territory known as Ambari Falakata and Jalpesh. These areas were inhabited by the Rajbansis (Koch) and belonged to the Raikats (Zemindars) of Baikunthopur under the Cooch Behar Raj. A temple dedicated to Shiva stands at Jalpesh today which was built by Maharaja Pran Narayan of Cooch Behar (1625-65). Alexander Hamilton, who led two missions to Bhutan in 1776 and 1777, recommended the cession of these tracts so that he could

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11. *Markham, Op. Cit. p.* 10
12. *Forrest, G. W. Selection from State Papers of the Governors-General of India, Vol. I.* 1910, *pp.* 313, 314.
13. *Khan Chaudhuri Amanatulla Ahmed, History of Cooch Behar, (in Bengali), Cooch Behar,* 1936.

"induce the Deb Raja to fulfil his agreement with Mr. Bogle and only to levy moderate transit duties on merchandise". Ashley Eden failed "entirely to comprehend the reasons" for this transaction, and wrote: "I am afraid on this occasion the friendship of the Bhutanese was purchased at the expense of the Baikunthpur Zemindar". According to Dr. David Field Rennie, Ambari Falakata was ceded to Bhutan by Capatain Turner in 1784 [14]. But a representation in the Bhutan Political proceedings for October 1865 states, "In the year 1787 A. D., Ain Falakata and Julpesh and certain talooks belonging to the Zemindar of pergunnah Bykantpur were against the consent and in the face of reiterated remonstrances of the Zemindar ceded to the Deb Raja of Bootan by order of the Right Honble Charles Earl of Cornwallis". The Renunciations of Jalpesh and Ambari Falakata were territorial concessions to Bhutan made in the interest of the Tibetan trade. It is also on record that in compliance with a requet from the Panchen Lama, Warren Hastings "granted to him hundred bighas of land of the bank of the Ganges opposite Calcutta".16 Gour Das Bysack observed it was "for the first and last time" that a "living divinity" in Tibet "condescended to accept Sannad from the representative of the British power in India and to become his jagirdar a hundred and thirty years ago".

The territorial disputes between Cooch Behar Raj and Bhutan which kept the frontier in a state of permanent tension right up to the Duar War (1864-65) have been copiously recorded in Cooch Behar state publications. These disputes often led to armed conflicts and occasional attempts at mediation by British representatives at Cooch Behar were of no avail as long as the frontier remained undefined and as long as means of making the central Bhutanese government amenable were not available. Tibet had been closed more effectively by the Chinese since 1792, and this fact alone explains a good deal of the dithering in British North-East Frontier policy in the first half of the 19th century. Clements R. Markham observes that the policy of "constant and watchful vigilance" gave way to"one of indifference and neglect, varied by occasional small but disastrous wars, which are waged not for any broad imperial end, but on account of some petty squabbles about boundaries"[18].

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14. *Rennie, Dr. D. F. Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War.* 1866, *reprinted by Manjusri, New Delhi,* 1970, *p.* 36
15. *Bhutan Political Proceedings, Oct.* 1865, *p.*2. *State Archives, Government of West Bengal.*
16. *Calendar of Persian Correspondence, Vol. V, Calcutta,* 1930, *p.* 31.
17. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol.LIX, Part,* 1, 1890, *p.* 73.
18. *Markham, Op. Cit. p. LXXX.*

Maharaja Harendra Narayan of Cooch Behar (1783-1839) was an able ruler. In his dealings with the English he was circumspect and firm. He made a determined bid to preserve his civil jurisdiction and the right of issuing Naryayani coins [19]. With the help of the Raikats of Baikunthopur he recovered from the Bhutanese the lands of Chamurchi and Ranghamali in the Duars. Subjects of Bhutan and Cooch Behar were entangled in armed clashes on the Maraghat frontier in 1808. Mr. Digby, the British Commissioner at Cooch Behar, mediated and gave his verdict in favour of Cooch Behar for the possession of Maraghat.

Digby's decision was reversed by Mr. David Scott, who made over to the Bhutanese the tract locally known as Gird Maraghat. in 1817. It appears that these fertile lands were transferred to the Bhutanese as a reward for their proclaimed neutrality in the Angolo-Nepalese War (1814-16).

In 1815 Babu Krishnakanta Bose and Rammohan Roy [20] were sent to Bhutan by David Scott. Krishnakanta Bose undertook the journey ostensibly to settle boundary disputes between Cooch Behar and Bhutan. Scott also hoped that "he would open up a line of communication with Tibet, via Bhutan"[21]. The political nature of this mission, dubbed as "unofficial" is also apparent from Dr. S. N. Sen's collection of old Bengali letters. Krishnakanta and Rammohan secured an assurance from the Deb Raja that Bhutan would not entertain any representation from the Nepalese for a joint offensive against the Company [22]. In Bhutan Krishnakanta collected a lot of information about the country and the people. His account of Bhutan was translated into English by David Scott and is still an eminently helpful study. The Bhutanese trader, according to this account, imported from Rangpur and Cooch Behar "swine, cattle, pan, betel, tobacco, dried fish and coarse cotton cloth". Among the articles they used to export to Tibet from the plains were grain, indigo, sandal and coarse cotton cloth. From Tibet they imported tea, silver, gold and silk goods. Like Tibet Bhutan was a good market for Chinese tea and silk goods in those days. Krishnakanta observed that besides the "officers of government and their

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19. *These coins were struck by the rulers of Cooch Behar. They are so called from the title "Narayan" borne by the Maharajas of Cooch Behar. After the establishment of British paramountcy in Cooch Behar* (1772) *the issue of these coins was restricted. The coin ceased to be legal tender in Cooch Behar in* 1866.
20. *It is impossible that the he was any other than Raja Rammohan of renascent Bengal, who was at Rangpur with Digby and who settled in Calcutta in* 1816.
21. *Barooah, Nirode K. David Scott in North-East India. p.* 34
22. *Sen, Dr. S. N. Prachin Bangla Patra Samgraha* (*A Collection of old Bengali Letters with English Synopses*). *Received Nov.* 12, 1815, *postscript.*

servants no person can trade with a foreign country" and trade in horses and blankets was monopolised "at a low price" by the officers [23]. The account leaves the impression that the trade between Bhutan and the lowlands of Cooch Behar and Rangpur was extensive while the trade between Bhutan and Tibet was conducted on a limited scale. Pemberton recorded (1838) that the Bhutanese traders to Tibet were "rigorously restricted" to a few principal routes and the efforts of Kashmiri merchants at Lhasa to revive the trade with Bengal through Bhutan were frustrated by the "jealousy of the Deb Raja and the Paro Pilo"[24]. Krishnakanta's account is perhaps the first to ascribe political instablity in Bhutan to the ambition on the Tongsa and Paro Penlops.

The British conquest of Assam (1826) projected Bhutan as a major factor affecting peace on the North-East Frontier. For the first time the Bhutanese hierarchy in the Duars of Kamrup and Darrang, where the boundary was now coterminous, became apprehensive of British intentions. Continuous records are available from this period to the "resumption" of the Assam Duars in 1841. They reveal British anxiety to reach the foothills of Bhutan. Still more interesting is the idea moulding the "united influence" of the Dharma and the Deb Rajas and the Bhutanese officials "in favour of reopening communications between British and Tibetan authorities" which had been so abruptly cut off since the Sino-Nepalese war of 1792. In 1836 the Governor General's Agent to the North-East Frontier wrote, "Our subjects have been excluded from the trade of Tibet and Bhutan through the jealousy and influence of the Chinese Government against the wishes of the Lamas and inhabitants of either country and though the favourable commerical treaty settled by Mr. Bogle in 1775 and subsequently admited in 1785 by the Deb Raja has never been abrogated yet it has been rendered of no benefit and virtually set aside through the interference of the Chinese government" [25]. The proposal for sending a new mission to Bhutan was discussed in the same year and the draft of a letter addressed to the Dalai Lama was prepared. This draft is dated Fort William the 27th June, 1836, and runs:

> "Events having recently occurred on the frontier of Assam which rendered it desirable that a personal negotiation should be held with the Bootan government, I have despatched an envoy to that court.
> Upwards of 53 years have now elapsed since a mission was despatched on the part of the British government to the court of Thibet and I am anxious to avail myself of the favourable opportunity which the presence in Bootan of my envoy affords to renew to Your Highness, after so long an interval the expression of regard and attachement which are still entertained towards you by the British government. When so long an interval has been suffered to elapse without the renewal of friendly demonstrations on either side, it is not surprising if suspicion of neglect or

23. *Asiatic Researches, Vol- XV, p.* 145.
24. *Pemberton, R. B. -Report on Bootan.* 1835, *reprinted Calcutta,* 1961. *p.* 78.
25. *Foreign P: C., June,* 1836, *No* 52. *National Archives of India, New Delhi.*

cause of misunderstanding should have arisen. My sole motive in making this overture is to perpetuate and consolidate a friendship, the foundation of which was laid a so happily and so long ago, and as I think that by the presence of my envoy he will be able to explain all matters to your satisfaction, I shall be very glad to hear that you have honoured him with an invitation to attend you"[26].

The "motive" obviously was to repoen the overland trade route to Tibet through Bhutan and the Chumbi valley. In fact, as Bogle a had observed earlier, "the Company's view- in a communication with Tibet are only to an extenshion of commerce" [27]. The previous mission which the letter mentions was that of Samuel Turner (1783), although Turner never saw Lhasa. It is possible that the new envoy to Bhutan, R. B. Pemberton, took such a letter addressed to the Dalai Lama with him, but there is nothing to show that the letter recached its destination. Permberton found the Bhutanese most determinedly opposed to "reopening of a communication between the British and Tibetan authorities"[28]. They "shrunk from the very discussion to send a letter to solicit leave to advance (to Tibet) as his predecessor Capt. Turner did in 1783 in Tibet"[29].

Pemberton's mission (1838) to Bhutan was a political fiasco only less dramatic than the later mission under Ashley Eden (1864). The Court of Directors admitted its failure though they commended it for the collection of "valuable miscellaneous information"[30]. In his Report Pemberton recommended the attachment of the Assam Duars. He thought it "perfectly practicable" either to open a dialogue with the Tibetan authorities or to dictate terms to the Bhutan government "as long as the Duars continued attached".

The opposition of the Tongsa Penlop frustrated the plan for a formal treaty with Bhutan. The idea of placing a British representative in Bhutan was given up. The pervading distrust and jealousy in Bhutan ruined hopes of securing the co-operation of the Bhutanese hierachy in reopening communication with Tibet. In fact, the the fate of Cooch Behar after 1772, the terriotorial losses sustained by Nepal and Sikkim in 1816-17 and the annexation of Assam in 1826 had deeply disturbed the Bhutanese mind. The Bhutanese officials on the border from the Penlop down to the Zinkaff reacted in a manner which British officials described as "delinquency". The ceaseless disturbances on the Cooch Behar- Bhutan frontier was the result of their fear of British intentions.

The endemic political strife in Bhutan and its repercussions in the Duars under Bhutanese control adversely affected the Bhutan-Cooch Behar-Rangpur trade. The value of exports and imports in this trade as quoted by Pemberton [31] gives an index of

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26. *Foreign Political, June* 27, 1836. *No.* NAI
27. *Markham, Op. Cit, p.* 199
28. *Pemberton, Op. Cit, p.* 98
29. *Foreign P. C. March* 27, 1839, *Robertson's note No* 81,*NAI*
30. *East India Company. Despatch from the Court of Directors, No.* 13 *of* 1839
31. *Pemberton, Op. Cit, p.* 77

this decline. William Bentick's measures for economy also seriously affected the trade. Under his orders the customary privileges extended to Bhutanese traders in Rangpur and Dinajpur were withdrawn. Dr. A. Campebell, the renowned Superintendent of Darjeeling, started an "annual fair" at Titallya where Bhutanese traders were encouraged to come with their merchandise. Later, Titalya was included in Rangpur district and the annual fair languished. In Dr. Rennie's time (1865) it was "one in name only".

Since the annexation of Assam no efforts were spared in opening a channel of regular communication with the central authority in Bhutan. Pemberton failed to accomplish this very important task. The transit trade of Tibet through Bhutan could not be reveived without Bhutanese co-operation which was not available. In 1845 Bhutan and Cooc h Behar were entangled in what is known as the Chakla Kheti dispute which lasted till 1849. These disputes focuss the persistent uncertainty in the relations between Bhutan and British India described by Dr. Campbell as "disgraceful". Campbell mediated in these disputes and seized the only alternative of negotiating with Bhutanese Subahs on the frontier. This new approach was remarkably successful. His letters leave the impression that matters were allowed to drift in this part of the frontier till they seriously jepardised peace. That is to say, there was a lack or policy on the part of the "paramount power" in Cooch Behar, Little wonder that much of the good hard work of Dr. Campbell was undone. After 1850 there were new men with new ideas. Major Jenkins succeeded Campbell in charge of the Bhutan frontier. In 1851 he recommended that "there ought to be no interference unless we are called upon to settle a dispute and then only as to the particular case in question". This was patently a negative attitude. The policy was dangerous since it did not envisage a settlement of the entire boundary through negotiations with Bhutanese authority, central or local. In fact, the very idea of negotiations on which Dr. Campbell relied so much, receded and the idea of retaliation against Bhutan gained ground. This in turn led to war and more annexations.

In 1861, after a military expedition, Sikkim accepted the principle of free trade by the treaty of Tumlong, The failure of Ashley Eden's mission to Bhutan in 1864 direclty led to the outbreak of the Duar war. The unpublished correspondence of Sir John Lawrence, the Viceroy, and Sir Charles S. Wood, the Secretary of State, reveal the strategy of economic blockage enforced against Bhutan. It was eminently successful. The Paro Penlop and the Western Bhutan chiefs who monopolised the lucrative trade with Cooch Behar and the plains became apprehensive. The peace party and the Deb Raja, the *de facto* central authority in Bhutan, accepted the terms offered by Col. Bruce at Sinchula. By the treaty of Sinchula (1865) Bhutan surrendered the Eighteen Duars bordering the districts of Rangpur, Cooch Behar and Assam and accepted the principle of free trade. The way to Tibet was still closed.

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