

Sikkim and Himalayan Trade

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I

In 1835 Darjeeling was acquired by the British as a grant from the Raja of Sikkim. Stable relations developed with Sikkim in 1861 and Bhutan in 1865. As a part of the latter settlement Kalimpong was given to British India. A series of agreements beginning in 1844 with chiefs of the hill tribes extended British control in the domain of the Brahmaputra Valley. Thus emerged an Himalayan frontier of India cushioned off from the hinterland of Tibet. The British officials like Lloyed and Grant, who advocated acquisition of Darjeeling ostensibly for the purpose of sanatorium, were struck by the potentiality of the ridge as a centre which would engross all the trade of the country.¹ Were a road built from India to Darjeeling, the people of Sikkim would take the opportunity, Grant argued, 'to open a traffic not only between themselves and the inhabitants of Darjeeling but between Bengal and Chinese Territory.'² By 1860 commercial interests were diverted from Western Tibet to the road to Lhasa through Sikkim. Eden wrote to Bengal in 1861. 'A considerable trade will spring up between Lassa and Darjeeling. The Tibetans will only be too glad to exchange gold dust, musk, borax, wool and salt for English cloth, tobacco etc.; and the people of Sikkim will gain as carriers of this trade, and their government will raise a considerable revenue from the transit duties.'³

II

On May 20, 1864 Bengal addressed a long letter to the Superintendent of Darjeeling, requesting him 'to prepare and submit a general report on the trade between Darjeeling and Sikkim and Tibet,.....'⁴. The reply to the aforesaid letter contained a faithful report on the Himalayan trade⁵ The details of the trade were supplied by Chæeboo Lama.⁶ The merchandise imported from Sikkim to Darjeeling, as the report indicated, consisted of horses, cattle including sheep and goats, blankets, salt, musk, wax, ghee, oranges, millet, rice, lime and

copper. The imports in 1863 were nearly double of those in 1860. The money earned during the four years under notice amounted to Rs. 89,535/- out of which the sum of Rs. 19,450/- was returned to Sikkim in the shape of goods. The articles of export from Darjeeling to Sikkim included English cloth, metal utensils, tobacco and coral. Among the items of export only tobacco was grown in the terai and others were not of local manufacture. With the improvement of communication, the Superintendent expressed his hopes, great quantities of tea would be exported to Sikkim and Tibet replacing brick tea imported from Lhasa and China.

Trade was conducted in four routes in Sikkim : two via Namchee and Chadam to the Great Rangeet and two via Zeeme to Goke and Tramduc to Colbong. The Tibetan merchants entered Darjeeling by routes starting from Chola, Yekla, Nathey, Cumra and Dangsa. All these met in Sikkim through which they entered Darjeeling via Gangtok and Dikeeling. The report was thoroughly examined by the Bengal Government. The Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling was instructed to keep the road to the Great Rangeet and also that to the Teesta (made by the British Force in Sikkim in 1861) in good repair.⁷

III

In April 1873, a deputation from the Society of Arts, London led by A. Campbell, Lt. Col. Gawler, J. D. Hooker and B. H. Hodgson submitted a memorandum to the Duke of Argyle, Secretary of State for India. They laid stress on the improvement of existing communications in Sikkim by extending roads to the Tibetan frontier and also completing railway connection between Darjeeling and Calcutta.⁸ In the same year the Raja of Sikkim had an interview with Sir John Campbell. One of the results of the interview was the visit, on deputation, of J. W. Edgar, Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling to Sikkim and Tibet frontier 'to enquire into the conditions and prospects of trade with Tibet and advisability of making a road through Sikkim to the Tibet frontier.'⁹ Edgar suggested, *inter alia*, that a road with good bridges should be constructed from the Teesta Valley to the Jelep pass.¹⁰ Bengal also concurred with Edgar that a considerable

trade might be established with countries beyond Darjeeling if a good road could be constructed through Sikkim. On the other hand, the Government of India was of opinion that so long as Peiking refused to allow commercial intercourse with Tibet, the British Government should not incur expenditure in constructing roads through Sikkim.¹¹

In 1879 a cart road to Jelep pass was completed. In 1880 tramway was laid in greater part of the way between Siliguri and Kurseong. In 1881 the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway had been opened to traffic upto Darjeeling. Darjeeling was thus brought within easy reach of the Tibetan frontier. It now took less than a week to reach the Tibetan border from Calcutta. With this developing opportunity, the question of promoting commercial intercourse with Tibet gained a new dimension. In 1885, Colman Macaulay, Financial Secretary to the Government of Bengal, was deputed to visit Sikkim and Tibetan frontier. Next year he visited Peiking. There he obtained a passport from the Chinese government to visit Lhasa to discuss with the Chinese resident and the Tibetan government 'the free admission of the native Indian traders through Sikkim and Derjeeling.'¹² The circumstances that eventually led to the abandonment of the Mission and finally to the conclusion of the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 are well-known.¹³

IV

Enough materials are available on the trend of Darjeeling-Sikkim trade in the last two decades of the 19th century. In 1881-82, it was reported that inspite of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and completion of a good road to Jelep pass, Darjeeling-Sikkim trade was not sufficiently encouraging. 'Probably on large expansion of commerce,' the report added, 'with the small state of Sikkim can be expected.'¹⁴ During 1892-93 'satisfactory increase' both under exports and imports was reported. The rise in exports was noticed in timber, hides, cattle, sheep and goats and woollen manufacture. The rise in imports was evident in cotton goods, tobacco, rice, provisions and Indian twist and yarn.¹⁵ During 1893-94 trade with Sikkim showed further increase of 15.47 per cent and 41.20 per cent in comparison with the

two previous years. In the import trade large increase was recorded in rain crops, timber, gram and pulse, and hides of cattle and in the export trade in rice, salt, mineral oils and cattle.¹⁶ The aggregate value of the traffic of 1895-96 was 24.21 per cent greater than that of 1894-95 and was nearly double of that of 1893-94. In 1896-97 the aggregate value of the trade with Sikkim was 30.36 per cent greater than that of 1895-96 and 61.93 per cent greater than that of 1894-85.¹⁷ There was increase in imports to Darjeeling under the following heads : spices (other than betel nuts), fresh fruits and vegetables, provisions (other than ghee), raw cotton, sheep, goats, gram and pulse and yak tails. The import in yak tails valued at Rs. 622/- in 1892-93 had altogether ceased in two subsequent years and was revived in 1895-96 fetching the value of Rs. 3000/-. The commodities which showed the largest rise in exports to Sikkim were silver, tobacco, brass and copper, Indian cotton piecegoods, European cotton twist and yarn, vegetable and mineral oils, horses, ponies and mules. For the first time since 1890-91, horses, ponies and mules were exported to Sikkim during 1895-96.¹⁸ Details of imports from and exports to Sikkim are given in Schedule A.

It appears that towards the end of the nineteenth century, trade figures show signs of potential growth. But London thought it prudent not to risk 'the substantial gain of our Entente Cordiale with China by clutching too eagerly at the problematic chances of Tibetan markets.'¹⁹ An altogether new approach to the problem starts with the Younghusband Mission to Lhasa in 1904.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

(Proceedings of Bengal Government are available in the West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta and Foreign Department consultations in the National Archives of India, New Delhi).

1. L. S. S. O'Malley. ed., *Darjeeling* 1907, p. 20.
2. A. Lamb, *Britain and Chinese Central Asia The Road to Lhasa 1767 to 1905* (London 1960) P. 88.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
4. Darjeeling District Records. Correspondence Vol, 28 No. 74B, 11 June 1861 H. Bell, Under-Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal to the Superintendent of Darjeeling. (Darjeeling District Records are available in Deputy Commissioner's office, Darjeeling).
5. Progs. of Bengal Government General. July 1864 H.C. Wake, Superintendent of Darjeeling, to Under-Secretary to Govt. of Bengal No 277, 30 June 864, pp 47-57.
6. For information regarding Cheeboo Lama, see Surgeon Rennie. *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War* (London 1866) pp 10-11, 64, 262 and W,W. Hunter *Statistical Account of Bengal* Vol X 1876, p. 104.
7. Progs of Bengal Government General July 1864 No 26, A. Eden, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal to the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, No. 1335 T, 7 July 1814.
8. A. Lamb *op cit.*, p. 132.
9. H. Risley. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (Cal, 1894 reprint Delhi 1973),, p. V.
10. Foreign Department. Political A. February 1875. No. 33. Edgar to the Commissioner of Cooch Behar No. 17 April 21, 1874
11. Foreign Department. Political A. February 1875 No, 35. C. U. Aitchison, Secretary to the Govt. of India to Rivers Thompson, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal. No. 238 P. 25 January 1875.
12. H. Risley : *op. cit.* p VII.
13. A. Lamb. *op. cit.* Chap VI.
H. Risley. *op. cit.* p VII
14. *The Report on the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan, 1881-82*, p. 10.
15. *Ibid*, 1892-93, p 24.
17. *Ibid.*, 1893-94, p 11
17. *Ibid.*, 1896-97, p 15
18. *Ibid* , 1895-96, p 13
19. Risley. *op. cit* p XIV.

For some of the causes that impeded the growth of Indo-Tibetan trade, see S. C. Das. *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* (Calcutta 1902, New Delhi 1970) pp 193-194.

Jahar Sen. *Indo Nepal Trade in the nineteenth century* (Calcutta 1977) pp 120-127.

SCHEDULE A

IMPORTS FROM SIKKIM TO DARJEELING

Articles :	1886	1887	1888	1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894
Coal (mds)	4647	1965	851	1156	77	576	738	4815	1701
Cotton piece-goods :									
(Indian) Rs.	2521	2323	2628	1490	x	127	2773	3872	4167
Gram and pulse mds.	6165	4891	4763	3385	5917	8903	6069	8017	20,031
Other grains mds.	19,338	25,700	23,199	26,439	28,086	46,698	x	x	75,519
Copper mds.	446	726	344	233	517	554	318	36	94
Hides Nos.	1197	1073	1077	789	1061	1761	2313	4196	6211

EXPORTS TO SIKKIM FROM DARJEELING

Cotton piece-goods :									
(European) Rs.	19,747	28,641	23,916	35,666	31,828	37,453	43,120	34,780	65,636
Cotton piece-goods :									
(Indian) Rs.	6,260	659	50	729	828	x	112	2,874	6,771
Rice mds.	3,413	1,673	3,512	4,532	8,573	7,655	7,164	12,579	11,900
Tobacco mds.	752	1,067	941	1,404	1,290	1,141	1,281	1,492	2,132
Wool (manufactured) x	x	x	1,212	2,199	2,075	6,405	8,200	6,995	4,580
Copper Unwrought mds.	241	71	x	x	76	91	68	119	148
Iron Unwrought mds.	254	159	x	x	98	96	x	x	x
Salt mds.	1,004	949	891	1,270	2,390	2,707	2,971	4,146	6,836

Compiled from Annual General Administration Reports of Darjeeling district

(1886—1894)