

CHAPTER V

The Battle Over Land For Tea And Freedom For Trade, 1838-1865

Pemberton's mission, as stated earlier, did not succeed in resolving the border conflicts between the two countries, nor did he succeed in effecting a commercial agreement with the Deb Raja of Bhutan. As a result, the relations between the two countries, rather than improving, continued to deteriorate. In fact, the history of British intercourse with Bhutan since Pemberton's mission has been 'one of complaints against petty raids and aggressions, and controversies about boundaries'¹.

British Annexation of The Assam Duars

After Pemberton's return it was felt by the British Government that the exclusive reliance upon moderation and negotiation in dealing with Bhutan should now be shelved, and a coercive policy, if necessary, should be embarked upon. In a letter dated 12 September 1838, the government directed Captain Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier, to prepare a plan for the settlement of all pending subjects of difference with the Bhutanese. The government was also of the opinion that this plan should be communicated later to the Bhutanese authorities as an 'ultimatum'. Jenkins after consulting Captain Mathie, who was the Collector of Kamrup, and Captain Vetch, Collector of Darrang, advised the Government of India on 15 September 1838 to endeavour to operate on the fears of the Bhutanese authorities as there was no chance of effecting any measure by an appeal to their reason and good feelings. He stated that the Government of India should extend no concession to the Bhutanese authorities since the concessions would bring nothing in return to the British. He mentioned that traders from India had formerly traded with Lhasa through Bhutan, but that Bhutan had been closed to them subsequently 'either from the jealousy of the government, or its ill conduct of the traders'². The Bhutanese continued in their policy of aggression by carrying away twelve British subjects in 1839, and again by seizing five British villages in 1841³. Jenkins

was, however, not sure of the merits of 'resumption' of the Duars, for he himself wrote in June 1841, "the deficiency of our troops, the nature of the country and the unknown consequences of a military operation render it very desirable to avoid this course except in the failure of all other attempts"⁴.

Obviously all other attempts had failed, and Lord Auckland, the then Governor General, finally resorted to the measure, which he himself acknowledged would be 'his painful duty to adopt'. Later in the year 1841, 'in consequence apparently of instructions from the Court of Directors orders were issued for the resumption of the whole of the Assam Duars'⁵. It was agreed that in compensation of the annexation a sum of Rs. 10,000 only should be paid annually to the Bhutanese chiefs of the Duars. Aitchison recorded that "this sum was considered to be equal to one third of the revenue of the Kamrup and Darrang Duars. No written agreement was made regarding this arrangement"⁶.

The absence of any strong central authority in Bhutan leading to misgovernment by local Bhutanese chiefs, non payment of stipulated annual tributes to the company, and finally the raids and outrages on the frontier must have facilitated the British decision to annex the region of the Assam Duars⁷. But the commercial minded diplomacy of the British also played a part, and made them realize the economic advantages that were

to be gained by the possession of this fertile tract of land. Tea was one item which was being grown extensively in Assam, and the increasing number of tea gardens led the British to believe that control of this area would provide them great commercial gains. Keeping in mind the advice of Bogle and Turner, that Bhutan and Tibet provided good markets for tea, and lucrative advantages could be wrested from the Chinese who were the sole agents of this tea trade, the British seized this opportunity of expanding the tea growing areas of Assam under their control. Besides tea, the Assam duars afforded an inexhaustible source of minerals and other products. In the words of Lieutenant Colonel MacDonald, "Limestone abounds all along the frontier, lignite is commonly found, the Bhutan hills hold iron and so coal must also be there, the coffee plants abound every where, the India rubber creeper is common, there is magnificent timber, the beauty and closeness of whose grain is well adapted for furniture, the trees can also be used for making boats, planks and beams, other valuable forest products include, gum, bees wax, lac, oil and incense, and the silk worm is there"⁸. If properly exploited these natural resources would bring in considerable amount of wealth for the British. Thus economic gains together with political considerations justified by Bhutanese aggressions, were more than sufficient reasons for the take over of the Assam duars.

Besides payment of compensation, the British government made one or two other concessions in order to reconcile the

Bhutanese to the loss of the Duars. Lieutenant David Scott, Magistrate of Rangpur, recommended the establishment of hats or market places at convenient locations in order to enable the Bhutanese to obtain supplies such as rice, cotton, dried fish, lac and tobacco. Hats were accordingly established at a number of places in the Darrang as well as in the Kamrup Duars⁹. However these concessions did not completely reconcile the Bhutanese to the loss of the Duars, and as will be seen later, they continued to carry on raids and demand an increase in the amount of compensation money being paid.

The annexation of the Assam Duars in 1841, was 'an inevitable corollary' to the occupation of Assam in 1826. The plain fact of taking possession of the Duars has been described as 'resumption' of an old right by the British. The Bhutanese took possession of the Duars, 'at no very distant time'. It was a 'usurpation' of the rights of the weak Assam princes who had to 'compromise' without denouncing their 'sovereign rights over the people', whom they still considered their subjects. These sovereign rights were inherited by the British who wanted to make them a reality by resuming what had been usurped. By mismanagement and failure to pay arrear tribute the Bhutanese had forfeited their rights to take possession of the Duars¹⁰.

It appears that the receipt of a fixed sum along with certain other privileges in lieu of the control over and

management of the duars region sometimes suited the interests of the Bhutanese themselves. As it happened, in 1842, the management of the estate of Ambari-Falakata in the Bengal duars was taken over by the British at the request of Bhutan itself.

The Bhutanese of the Kooreaparah Duar in Assam who were under the direct government of a body of chiefs known as the Sath Rajas, themselves subordinates of the ^aTowang Raja, decided in the winter of 1843-44, to relinquish all claims of the Kooreaparah Duar to the British in consideration of an annual payment of Rs. 5000/-. This sum very nearly represented the amount which they used to realise from the tract by direct collection during the eight months of the year for which they held it¹¹. (In 1852, a misunderstanding arose between the British and the Tibetan government over this region which was however resolved by a treaty signed on 28 January 1853 at Kooreaparah)¹².

Therefore neither peaceful transition nor forcible resumption would sum up the whole story.

Border Hostilities And Its Adverse Effect On Trade

In 1844 a conflict arose between Cooch Behar and Bhutan which was known as the Chakla Kheti dispute, and it lasted

till 1849. This dispute concerned the same old story of Bhutanese trespassing into a small tract of land called the Chakla Kheti and forcibly carrying off the produce. Campbell, who was then in charge of the Cooch Behar frontier, gave his verdict in favour of Cooch Behar¹³. Thus the relations between the two countries in the 1840's continued to be what can be termed as 'uncertain', and which has been described by Campbell as 'disgraceful'.

Campbell, however, in an endeavour to keep open the channel of communications, resorted to the only alternative policy of negotiating with the Bhutanese subahs on the frontier. He reported that the Bhutan officers had 'no disposition to openly encourage encroachment on us'. In his opinion, it was because of the political organisation of the Bhutanese state which was 'so unsteady, so rapacious and so unprincipled' that their border subjects had become almost uncontrollable¹⁴. Major Jenkins, who succeeded Campbell in 1851, was a man with different ideas. He recommended that "there ought to be no interference unless we are called upon to settle a dispute and then only as a particular case in question"¹⁵. This policy therefore did not envisage a settlement of the entire boundary through peaceful negotiations but kept the option of limited retaliation open.

When the Bhutanese realised that the prospect of restoration of the Assam Duars was bleak, an attempt was

made by them to increase the compensation money to rupees fifteen thousand, if not at least to twelve thousand. In March 1854, a meeting was arranged between the Agent to the Governor General at Guwahati, and the uncle of the Dharma Raja of Bhutan, and the Dewangiri Raja. But since the British did not accede to the demands of increased payment, the Bhutanese were reported to have committed several atrocities on their way back to the Buxa Duar¹⁶. While enquiries were being made on the above mentioned incidents, fresh reports arrived of outrages committed by the Bhutanese on merchants and British subjects. There were cases of kidnapping as well. A person named Aurung Singh, and another called Ramdollal together with his son wer^e taken captive by the Bhutanese. All demands to release them were met by vague replies. Robberies were also common. A merchant named Uttam Chand was said to be plundered by the Bhutanese of property valued at rupees seven hundred or eight hundred. Another trader was also robbed of some cloth and sixty rupees¹⁷. The British government immediately directed the local authorities to close the passes from the hills, if the culprits were not surrendered, or the outrages were repeated.

Closing the passes and thereby effecting an economic blockade proved to be an useful ploy, which even in the

future was to produce satisfactory results for the British. Even at the present time as soon as the passes were closed, effective steps of retribution were immediately taken by the Deb and the Dharma Rajas of Bhutan, by removing the Dewangiri Raja from office who was suspected as being the main culprit. Even the Tongsa Ponlob who was in control of the Goalpara Duars and believed to be in compliance with his subordinates in committing atrocities, was heavily fined. Colonel Jenkins further proposed on 13 November 1855 that the value of property plundered by the Dewangiri Raja should be deducted from the revenue due to the Bhutanese. He also wanted to punish the Bhutanese by the immediate occupation of all the Bengal Duars, the only measure he felt 'likely to be effective short of invading the country'¹⁸.

However these threats appeared to be futile for again on 26 November 1856, another Indian merchant named Salgram Oswal who had gone to Mainaguri to trade was seized and detained on flimsy grounds¹⁹. One fact however emerged from the above mentioned incidents. In spite of the deterioration in trade recorded between India and Bhutan at this period of time, a trade still lucrative enough to lure Marwari merchants all the way from Rajasthan, must still have been going on.

Coming back to border disputes, the atrocities mentioned above include only a few amongst numerous crimes supposed to

have been committed by the Bhutanese. If British sources are to be believed, the Bhutanese continued their aggression on British territory from the borders of the Bengal Duars and on Cooch Behar. Ashley Eden remarked that during this period, scarcely a year had passed without the occurrence of several outrages, any one of which would have fully 'justified the adoption of a policy of reprisal or retaliation'²⁰. It would however be unfair to put the entire blame of these outrages on the Bhutanese in the absence of any account from their end. There were definitely causes for complaints on both sides and some of the stories of the Bhutanese outrages may be said to be exaggeration§.

Be that as it may, the British government in India wanted to put an end to all these complaints against their 'meddlesome neighbour'. In 1856, Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General, expressed the opinion that "if there should be a recurrence of such incursions the Governor General deeming it a paramount duty to protect the subjects of the British government will have no alternative but to take measures for the complete occupation of the Bengal Duars"²¹.

Meanwhile, in 1857, the Sepoy Mutiny broke out providing the first real challenge to the British rule in India. During the mutiny the sympathies of the Bhutanese were entirely with the mutineers, there by revealing their hostility towards the British. When the storm of the mutiny

abated, it increased the debt of India by about thirty eight and a half millions and the military charges which ensued, augmented the annual expenditure by about eighteen millions²². An adventurist policy against Bhutan was now out of question. But the direct assumption of authority by the Crown marked no significant change in British policy in India. The decision made by the Company was endorsed by the government of India within a few years. Thus the districts of Ambari -Falakata, which it will be remembered were being managed by the British Indian government from 1842, were seized by the British, and their revenues withheld. Sir Frederick Halliday, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, had proposed taking over these districts during the mutiny itself, but the turmoils of the uprising had prevented the execution of this order till 1860.

The unsettled state of affairs between the two countries must have adversely affected the trade as can be made out from the data presented in Table 2 and 3. Even though complete reliance cannot be placed on these data, they are nonetheless suggestive of the general pattern, and should be looked at accordingly. The total value of importations during the four years was estimated at Rs. 1700 while the value of goods taken in exchange amounted to Rs. 4200 only. Among the imports brought into Bhutan cloth including cotton goods were the only article worth mentioning²³. A suggestion

was forwarded by Ashley Eden, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, regarding the increase in the export of tea from India to Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. Eden pointed out that the inhabitants of these regions were in the habit of drinking Brick tea, and it was this type and not the finer quality, which ought be sent to these regions from India. Brick tea, pointed out Eden could be prepared quite easily without interfering in any way with the preparation of finer tea for the European market, since the Brick tea was made from the coarse thick leaves which were not plucked for the ordinary manufacture and were hence useless²⁴.

In 1863 mercantilist intercourse between Cooch Behar and Bhutan showed some signs of improving, when the Raja of Cooch Behar wrote a letter to Major W. Agnew who was officiating as the Governor General's Agent in the North East frontier, informing him of his decision to reopen commercial intercourse with Bhutan. This transaction, reported the Raja had been closed for some time owing to quarrels on the Bhutan frontier. Since these aggression had stopped occurring for about a year, and the Deb Raja himself had requested the Maharaja of Cooch Behar to re-open communication^s the Maharaja thought it prudent to comply with his request²⁵.

Table 2
Imports from Bhutan, 1860-63

Name of articles	Unit	Rate in Rs. per unit	Quantity				Total value for 1860-63
			1860	1861	1862	1863	
Cattle	no.	15	10	10	10	10	600
Horses	no.	40	3	4	4	4	600
Knives	no.	8	5	5	5	10	200
Wax	md.	20	3	4	4	4	300

Source : General Progs. Dated July 1864, W.B.S.A.

Table 3
Exports to Bhutan, 1860-63

Name of articles	Value in Rs.				Total value for 1860-63
	1860	1861	1862	1863	
Broad cloth	1000	1000	1000	1000	4000
Coral	50	50	50	50	200

Source : General Progs. Dated July 1864, W.B.S.A.

The Mission of Ashley Eden

Hopkinson who was the Governor General's Agent in the North East Frontier, in a letter written to the ^Government of Bengal in 1861 emphasized the advantages of sending a mission to Bhutan. In his own words, "It must be remembered

that nothing could exceed the distinction, and marked respect and attention to all its wants, with which Captain Pemberton's mission was everywhere received and which were continued during the entire period of its stay in Bootan, and I see no reason to suppose that a similar mission would meet with a different reception now, while if successful, it might terminate in the establishment of a permanent agent at the Bootan court, and such an agency would be the best instrument for paving the way for friendly intercourse with Lassa"²⁶. Lord Canning too, prior to his departure from India, favoured this suggestion even though he is reported to have been 'doubtful as to placing an agent in Bootan' and wanted 'to leave this question to be decided after the result of the mission is known'²⁷.

In July 1862, a messenger named Mikunda Singh was despatched from Assam to the court of the Deb Raja in order to inform them about the intended mission. The Bhutan government was not enthusiastic to receive the proposed mission. The Deb Raja did not want the mission to come to Bhutan because it would be attended with much trouble owing to the cold weather, and bad state of roads, and also because the Shabdrung did not wish an interview²⁸.

It was not till the winter of 1863, that all arrangements for the sending of the mission were completed. Ashley

Eden, then Secretary of the Government of Bengal, was put incharge, accompanied by Captain Austin as his assistant, and Dr. Simpson as Medical Officer. Attempts to secure free commerce between the two countries was definitely in the agenda. But this was not given top priority, and was to be kept in subordination to the main political objects of the mission. The British, at this stage, were more interested in ensuring political stability between the two countries rather than in securing commercial advantages. They probably felt that commercial transactions would automatically go up with the improvement in the political situation.

Eden's mission started for Bhutan at the close of 1863, by way of Darjeeling and Dalimkot, and reached Paro through the Ha valley (Map II). At Dalimkot, there was, with the exception of the fort, only some six or seven little huts, but no place from where Eden and his party could expect supplies. The local men had been warned by the Dzongpon of Dalimkot that every man found selling provisions to the foreigners would be fined. The object of this order was to preserve the Dzongpon's trade monopoly. It was his practice and that of all the frontier officials to prohibit any trade which the hillsmen might have with the plains. These officials followed a practice of buying rice cheaply, or extorting it from their tenants in the Diars and storing it,

and later selling it at an exorbitant price to the ryots and to other people in the interior of the country²⁹.

After reaching Paro Eden discovered that a small market was held there every evening. Some two or three hundred people collected there every day, and as far as Eden could see, they never had anything to sell except walnuts, pears and radishes. However Eden saw great possibilities of converting this market of Paro into one of the greatest trading marts in the east. According to him the location of this mart, being surrounded by land capable of producing great quantities of wheat and rice, could make it one of the entrepots of the trade with Tibet, Tartary, China and India. Eden felt that Paro should be full of depots of broad cloth, cotton goods, cutlery, rice, corals, tea, spices, cincobs, leather and miscellaneous articles of European manufacture brought there to be exchanged for rock salt, musk, gold dust, borax and silks of Tibet. But Eden noticed a curious lack of communication between Tibet and Bhutan, and mentioned that not a single Tibetan merchant ventured into Bhutan³⁰.

Commenting further on the decline of Bhutan's foreign trade Eden observed that the manufactures of the country were at ^{so} low an ebb as to discourage any transactions with other countries. Of minerals it could be said that some iron was discovered at Paro, and some lead, which the Bhutanese claimed

they had obtained from the same mine at Paro. The fact that their supply was not equal to their demand had been corroborated by the fact that they brought lead and small quantities of sulphur from the plains³¹. Eden observed that there was perhaps no other condition in Bhutan in which the deterioration had been greater than in foreign trade. In 1809, according to Lieutenant Rutherford, the trade between Bhutan and Assam had amounted to two lakhs of rupees per annum, but during Eden's time this trade had dwindled considerably. The Rangpur fair had ceased to exist, and in 1864, trade at Rangpur was confined to the purchase of a little tobacco and indigo³². With Darjeeling too, Eden felt that the Bhutanese trade had become nominal at that time. There were no Tibetan merchants in Bhutan. The Bhutanese merchants, however were said to frequent the markets of Tibet but were not looked upon favourably by the Tibetans because of their habits. The roads between these two countries were suitable for the passage of goods but, due to the mistrust which the Tibetans had for the Bhutanese traders, these two countries were excluded from the mutual interchange of commodities³³.

Eden was detained at Paro for about sixteen days. At Paro, he learnt that Bhutan was in a state of anarchy. The Tongsa Ponlob was reported to have usurped all authority and turned the Deb and the Dharma Rajas into mere puppets in his

hands. Even though the conditions were not at all conducive for negotiations, Eden persevered, and on 15 March 1864, reached Punakha. The meeting with the Bhutan Durbar proved to be a disaster. The Bhutanese did not hesitate to humiliate the British envoy and forced him to sign a treaty. The Tongsa Ponlob asked for the restitution of the Assam Duars, and threatened Eden with war if it was not done. He also did not agree to the stationing of a British agent in Bhutan, and the freedom of trade. Eden and his companions were also reported to have been assaulted by the Bhutanese. In order to ensure his and his companions' safety, Eden eventually consented to sign an agreement drawn up by the Tongsa Ponlob, which provided for the restoration of the Assam Duars along with certain other tracts. The agreement further bound together the four states, 'Bootan, Fearingees (the English) Behar (i.e. Cooch Behar) and Sikkim' to the effect that if any of them committed aggression, 'the other three should punish it'. Eden signed the treaty with the words, 'under compulsion', written under his signature³⁴.

Thus ended ^{the} mission of Ashley Eden who thereafter returned to India through Paro, and what ever hopes might have been entertained of renewing friendly relations with Bhutan were shattered.

The Duar War And The Economic Blockade

But, the Bhutanese too possibly had causes for complaints, and their refusal to accede to the establishment of a British resident in Bhutan, and to free trade and commerce with India, had certain points in its favour. As an Indian newspaper reported on 28 May 1864, "If he (Deb Raja) has declined to enter into a treaty of trade, it is not to be wondered at. He knows every land in which the English begins to trade it is not long before they take possession of and to consent to it is to resign his crown after a time"³⁵.

Be that as it may, on the return of Ashley Eden, the Government in India found itself on the war path. The military strategies as also a detailed description of this war does not really come within the purview of this study. What is of real concern is the decline in commerce before and during the war, and the signing of the treaty of Sinchula after it.

Needless to say that with the deteriorating political conditions between the two countries, the commercial conditions also showed a downward trend. This fact was emphasized by a correspondent of the 'Calcutta Englishman' writing from Darjeeling at the end of September 1864.

In former years when the Booteahs were on friendly terms with our government, they brought their ponies, musk, wax, dogs, etc.

to Rangpore. Our government to encourage this trade provided suitable accomodation for these traders. Before however, the Booteahs could bring their goods into our territory they had to apply for a pass and chaprassies (official messengers) were sent to accompany them. This the Booteahs found degrading as well as expensive. Later when Lord William Bentinck visited Dinajpur and Rangpore, for the sake of economy he gave orders that no further allowances should be given to the headmen and left the traders to find accomodation where and how they best could. The trade between Bootan and Rangpur gradually fell off and finally ceased altogether. Then Dr. Campbell superintendent of Darjeeling established the Titalya fair which was a great success while under his control. Titalya however, was subsequently included within the Rangpore district, the fair gradually languished, and is now one in name only³⁶.

T.A. Donough, Deputy Magistrate of Jalpaiguri, in a letter dated 20 July 1864 to Colonel Henry Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam, stated that there was hardly any trade carried on in the plains of Bhutan. The Indian traders he said, dared not venture into Bhutan. The trifling trade which was carried on was by the Bhutanese themselves, who came into Indian territory, and supplied themselves with whatever they needed from the Indian traders residing in the villages along the frontier. This the Bhutanese obtained by means of barter, exchanging the produce of their fields with whatever they needed, disposing off their surplus agricultural produce in the local hats or markets as rapidly as possibly by retail³⁷. Besides agricultural produce, Donough

mentioned in another letter to Hopkinson dated 1 August 1864, the other items brought by the Bhutanese included wax, Manjeet or madde^h, ox tails, blankets, a very small quantity of musk, and a few ponies. In exchange for these, the Bhutanese obtained from Indian traders, cotton piece goods (principally consisting of stout longcloth and jean), broad cloth, dried fish, tobacco, and gur³⁸. This trade was in comparison to the one carried on in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, in reality a mere pittance.

Further evidence of this trifling trade is obtained from another despatch to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, which said, "The trade with the hills is not very brisk; the imports consist of hill salt, wax, musk, pepper, species, chowries, Booteah cloths and blankets, knives, ponies and occasionally cattle stolen from other Doars. The hillmen take in return betel nut, pan, cotton and India cloths, dried fish, mustard oil and a little rice"³⁹. It was with a view to remove border conflicts and facilitate the smooth flow of commerce that Ashley Eden had been sent to Bhutan. However, the failure of this mission made the British decide to use force to restore peace.

The financial depletion on the aftermath of the Sepoy Mutiny compelled the government to abandon any plan of a full invasion of Bhutan. It was decided that the best strategy would be to occupy the Bengal duars, until the

Bhutanese had sent an ambassador to deliver up the treaty forced on ~~Eden~~ and to apologise humbly⁴⁰. In a Khuresta addressed to the Deb Raja of Bhutan dated 9 June 1864, the then Governor General of India, John Lawrence, laid down certain conditions to be fulfilled by the Bhutanese by 1st September 1864, the failure of which would lead the British government to take steps⁴¹.

The reply which the Bhutanese government gave to this demand was evasive, and accordingly, in a proclamation issued by H.M. Durand, Secretary to the Government of India on 12 November 1864, it was stated that

The Governor General in Council has therefore reluctantly resolved to occupy permanently and annex to British territory the Bengal Duars of Bhootan and so much of the hills territory including the forts of Dallingkot, Panakha and Dewangiri as may be necessary to command the passes, and to prevent hostile or predatory incursions of Bhootanese into the Darjeeling districts or into the plains below. A military force amply sufficient to occupy this tract and to overcome all resistance has been assembled on the frontier⁴² and will now proceed to carry out this resolve⁴².

Durand further added that 'the occupation' of the country was not to be delayed on any ground. No overtures from the Bhutan government were to be entertained unless the latter were prepared to (1) surrender all the Bengal Duars, and the hill country on the left bank of the Tista, upto such points on the watershed of the lower range of hills

as may be laid down by the British Commissioner, (2) give up the two documents extorted from Mr. Eden, and (3) surrender all captives⁴³.

The political as well as the military initiatives before the commencement of the Duar was wholly on the side of the British. The Bhutanese had always been represented as the aggressors, but it may be possible that they had a strong complaint also. Surgeon Rennie observed, "the remarks about fault being equal on both sides as regards aggression against property has ^{very} likely a fair amount of truth in it - at least such is my opinion"⁴⁴. The Bhutanese themselves felt that they had been greatly wronged, and stated that "We are the people to declare war, instead of which they are doing it"⁴⁵.

The military hostilities between the two countries commenced from November 1864, and continued for one whole year. It was not until the November of the following year that the treaty of Sinchula was finally signed. The British forces were entirely successful in their early ventures, and believed that they had completely defeated the Bhutanese by January 1865. The Bhutanese, however, showing unexpected valour and strategy, attacked Dewangiri in February 1865, and created a temporary set back for the British troops. The triumph of the Bhutanese was, however, shortlived as the British

made amends of the losses sustained by them and secured a stranglehold on the Bhutanese by the effective policy of economic blockades.

In a letter written by Colonel J.C. Haughton, Political Agent and Chief Civil Officer, dated 9 January 1865, to Brigadier General Mulcaster it was stated that the Government of Bhutan should be roused to a sense of its position by applying external pressure. Haughton felt that this could best be achieved by blockading all the passes of Bhutan till the rulers of the country came to terms with the British. Mulcaster was requested to direct all officers commanding the various posts and passes, to prevent as far as possible all intercourse between the people of the hills and those of the plains. Care was however to be taken to see that those Bhutanese who had submitted to the British were not prevented from obtaining things from the Indian markets⁴⁶. The measure was held to be effective, and at the same time, did not 'inflict any permanent injury on the country or its inhabitants'⁴⁷.

Colonel Henry Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam, wrote to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, enquiring whether the instructions regarding the blockade of the passes included the closure of the Tawang pass as well. It might be mentioned again that the Tawang or the Kooreaparah Duar

was independent of Bhutan, and closing these passes would interfere with the trade of the people of Tibet, with whom Hopkinson said, "we have no quarrel and who we believe wish us well, and the measure might also raise the jealousy and suspicions of the Lassa authorities and make them think we are going against them"⁴⁸. The decision of leaving the Tawang pass closed or open was vested upon Hopkinson who probably in the end decided to keep the pass open as was suggested by the fair which was held in Udalguri in Kooreaparah. Though leaving this pass open might allow some provisions for Bhutan, and go against the principle of economic blockade, Hopkinson was reluctant to antagonise the Tibetans.

By March 1865, the effects of the blockade was being felt. Even the Meches of the Diars were threatened with scarcity and starvation, and they complained to Colonel Haughton "that owing to the scarcity of rice our helpless families are brought to starve The merchants who had hitherto supplied us with rice and cotton seeds venture not to come to our quarter nowadays"⁴⁹. By the summer of 1865, the Bhutanese themselves were being adversely affected by the blockade. This is what the records say :

The general result of these measures have been that the Bootanese have suffered very considerably. They have been punished on various occasions in action, they have been almost entirely cut off from the plains and their trade

has been much curtailed. There are many articles of constant use among them some of which habit has made necessities of life, of which they are almost entirely deficient. They have accordingly made overtures for peace more than once, but the basis on which they are willing to treat viz. the surrender of the Bengal Dooars being inadmissible these overtures have come to nothing⁵⁰.

Effective though the blockade may have been all commercial activities between the two countries were not completely stopped. There is a particularly detailed description of the fair held at Udalguri in Kooreaparah, this pass being kept open by the British, keeping the Tibetan trade in view. The ^aTawang Raja had reiterated his friendship with the British, and this fair was held even during 1865 as in other years. H.M. Reilly, Superintendent of Police, in a report given to the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, described in some details this particular fair. Reilly said that due to the war, the fair was not as well attended as usual. There were fewer Bhutanese, and fewer Mahajans, Cacharees and Assamese, from the neighbouring districts than there was at the last fair. This paucity of numbers was attributed to the war, and "also in consequences of the want of confidence, displayed by the Sath Rajahs of Korreeaparah in not coming down to the plains, when they were first expected. The reason for the latter is owing to the delay occasioned by the Booteahs coming down to the plains, which gave to the report that there was to be no fair this year at all, and thus few were prepared to attend

from a distance". Decline was also noticed in the amount of merchandise for sale in the fair, compared to the merchandise of the previous year. The Bhutanese from the lower ranges visited the fair, and bartered among other things chillies, blankets, Jubrang (spices), ponies, asses, mules, dogs, cows etc. and obtained in return rice and cloth. The war had not been made the subject of open discussion in the fair, even though Reilly was of the opinion that the traders discussed it in private amongst themselves⁵¹:

Besides this fair, small occasional references have also been made by British officers, who in the course of their campaign saw several instances of commercial transactions. For example, at a place called Choorá Bundar, which was a large village on the frontier of Rangpur, several Marwarⁱ~~ee~~ merchants were noticed. These Marwarⁱ~~ee~~ merchants obtained tobacco and mustard seeds from the Bhutanese, and sent them to as distant places as Serajgunj. Again, at another Mech settlement in Sena Tockooria⁵² a number of Bengalis were observed exchanging rice in husks for cotton at the rate of six maunds valued at Rs. two to eight, with equal weights of cotton⁵³. This exchange in rice and cotton has also been described by David Field Rennie, Medical Officer of the 80th regiment that was sent to Bhutan in February 1865. Rennie said that through this trade, the hill people displayed their commercial ignorance and allowed

the Bengali traders to make enormous profits in this way⁵⁴. The Titalya fair was also going on while the war continued. Rennie visited it, and found that "A great variety of goods both European and native were exposed for sale and it was astonishing to see how judiciously the selection had been made". Also, "the vendors seemed indifferent at so early a stage of the proceedings about forcing the sale of their wares and held on to first prices with a tenacity quite foreign to native commercial character"⁵⁵.

But, in spite of these small transactions being carried on the policy of economic blockade against the Bhutanese was quite successful. The Paro Ponlob and the western Bhutan chiefs were reportedly apprehensive at this continued blockade since they controlled, in the main, the lucrative trade that Bhutan carried on with Cooch Behar and the Bengal plains. Taking advantage of the situation, the British Indian government sent a letter to the Deb Raja on 5 June 1865 stating^{ing} that if the Deb Raja refused to accept the proposed terms, troops would be sent further deep into his territory. The Deb Raja, in reply, pleaded for the restoration of the Diars, and said that from the revenues he received from the Diars a large sum went for the various religious festivals. He therefore threatened the Indian government by saying that evil would fall upon them in the event of their stopping the means of providing for these festivals⁵⁶. This letter was

followed by others of the same nature including a statement by a Bhutanese named Passa, who gave himself up at Buxa on 31 July. His opinion was that the ry^oats of Bhutan were in much distress in consequence of the annexation of the Duars and stopping of all trade. Passa's conclusion was that since the ry^oats were all in earnest for peace, and no arrangements had been made for the continuation of the war, it would be best for all concerned to make immediate settlement of the dispute⁵⁷.

The Treaty of Sinchula

The British too were realising the problems of keeping up this war. The cost of maintaining European and native troops all along the line from the tea gardens of Darjeeling to those of Barrang, more than two hundred miles east, was proving to be quite a burden. They were prepared to make peace, but only on an unconditional acceptance by the Bhutanese of all the terms laid down by them. In September 1865 the Governor General wrote - "Nothing short of your absolute submission and acceptance of the terms laid down will avert hostilities"⁵⁸. On 15 October 1865, the Dharma Raja of Bhutan in a last futile bid wrote a letter to the Queen pleading that the duars which yielded a very small revenue, be restored back to Bhutan. In the event of the

Diars not being restored, misfortune would fall both upon the Dharma Raja as well as the upon the English⁵⁹. The British were not to be taken in by such vague threats. But, in any case, Colonel Bruce Officiating Commissioner of Western Diars was asked to offer peace to the Deb Raja.

In November two representatives from the Deb and the Dharma Rajas arrived, and negotiations began at Sinchula above Buxa Diar, between Colonel Bruce and the Bhutanese representatives. The proceedings began on the 4th of November and the representatives made one last attempt to retain at least 'one Diar to furnish them with pan (betel leaf)'. Colonel Bruce replied that not a single Diar could be given up, but they would be able to obtain pan in abundance from all the Diars⁶⁰. During the next day's proceedings on 6 November, the Bhutanese officers said that if entry is made free for all, the Indian traders entering Bhutan might run the risk of being robbed by budmashes, or evil men. Colonel Bruce replied that the Indian government guaranteed protection to Bhutanese merchants all the way to Calcutta, and the Bhutan government ought to reciprocate this by protecting traders who entered Bhutan⁶¹.

The preliminary terms of the treaty were to the effect that the Bhutan government must tender ample apology for the insult of the British mission under Eden, that they must

give up the guns abandoned at Dewangiri within two months. There would be free trade between the two countries, and in lieu for the Duars the Bhutanese would get an annual subsidy of Rs. 25,000/- rising in three years to Rs. 50,000/- during which good conduct should be maintained by the Bhutan government⁵². The final treaty known as the treaty of Sinchula, or as the Bhutanese called - the 'ten article treaty of Rawa Pani'⁵³, contained ten articles and was signed by the envoys on 11 November 1865. (See appendix V). The article II and article IX of the treaty however, caused some consternation among the Bhutanese, and led to some hesitation on their part, before the final signature was made. It was proposed in Article IX, that "there shall be free trade and commerce between the two governments. No duties shall be levied on Bhootanese goods imported into British territories, nor shall the Bhootan government levy any duties on British goods imported into or transported through Bhootan territories. Bhootanese subjects residing in British territories shall have equal justice with British subjects and British subjects residing in Bhootan shall have equal justice with the subjects of the Bhootan government". The clauses of this article, as well as those of Article II regarding fixation of boundary between the two countries, seemed to disconcert the Deb Raja. In the Bhutanese version of the treaty which was sent to him for his signature the Deb Raja had article two

and article nine of the treaty erased. Regarding the first erasure, the Deb Raja said that he wanted no one else but Bruce to fix the boundaries. Regarding the erasure of the other Article he said that he was apprehensive about a recurrence of hostilities between the two countries, and that it would be better if trade be transacted at the frontier posts⁶⁴.

Colonel Bruce explained to the Lieutenant Governor that the ^{Deb} Raja was possibly quite ignorant of the possible consequence of his act. The omission of the 9th Article would be as unfavourable to Bhutan as to the British, opined Bruce, because Bhutan would be deprived of the free import of betel nuts, betel leaves, and other goods from the plains and also would no longer be able to export salt, as freely as before⁶⁵. However the Deb Raja no longer wished to antagonise the British since he had also informed Bruce that if the latter was not satisfied with the ^{Deb} Raja's decision, the treaty should immediately be returned to him so that all erasures would be at once corrected and restored⁶⁶.

The Lieutenant Governor immediately instructed Bruce to inform the Deb and the Dharma Rajas that either the treaty was to be signed in all its entirety or not be signed at all. Further, if all the articles were not agreed upon, then hostilities and the blockade upon the Bhutanese would

continue. It was emphasized that "the Rajahs should be informed that they must accept article 9 of the treaty, but that every reasonable precaution which they can suggest in view to satisfying them and preventing difficulties from arising, will be taken"⁶⁷.

Regarding the second article, the Lieutenant Governor gave instructions that Bruce must explain to the Bhutanese that he would be succeeded by Major Agnew, who would settle the boundary question⁶⁸, in consultation with the Bhutanese agents and on the basis of principles described by the Deb Raja.

In the end, the Bhutanese accepted all the conditions, and the treaty, drawn up at Sinchula on 11 November 1865, was finally concluded on the 25th and 26th of January 1866. Disputes between the two countries, however, continued over the payment of subsidy, and handing over of the British guns seized by the Bhutanese at Dewangiri. The British government again used its trump card by saying that in the event of the Bhutanese not giving up the guns, hostilities would recommence, all compensation money would be stopped, and the economic blockade would again be reimposed⁶⁹. Ultimately however this problem was solved, and on 25 February 1866, Colonel Agnew wrote to the Secretary to the Government of India that the guns had been delivered and hence, payment of the subsidy would be made immediately⁷⁰.

The outcome^e of the Duar war was not very surprising. It was only to be expected that Bhutan would never stand upto the British. It was surprising because the British had to suffer some reversals, and the Bhutanese held out as long as they did. The British used the policy of economic blockade as an effective lever to force the Bhutanese to come to terms. Knowing how greatly the Bhutanese depended upon the supplies from the plains, the British Indian government very effectively exploited this weakness of the hill people. Regarding the acquisition of valuable tract of territory with an area of about 450 square miles and which included Kalimpong as well, the "Friend of India" commented - "this will greatly extend the hill territory of Darjeeling and will enable us to trade directly with Tibet without, as in the north west, piercing the hills to a great distance"⁷¹. Surgeon Rennie expressed the importance of the treaty for commercial intercourse with Tibet in the following words - "Though direct communication with Lhasa within a moderate period may not be practicable, more extended commerce with Tibet than now exists, is not necessarily precluded and it occurs to me that our present relations with Bhutan might be turned to useful account with reference thereto"⁷². The British always kept in mind that ultimately it was the trade with Tibet by which maximum commercial advantages could be gained, and always aimed at seeking better means of communication with the country.

The territorial gains of the British by this treaty were also considerable. The whole area of the Duars would yield, it was estimated, a gross revenue of one and a half lakh of rupees with prospects of increasing several fold in course of a few years. It possessed vast tracts of excellent timbers besides immense possibilities of the cultivation of tea⁷³. However, these territorial acquisitions did not fully meet the expectations of the British tea planters in India who favoured a deeper incursion into Bhutan. When the terms of the treaty were under discussion, John Lawrence had written to Charles Wood that a 'great howl' had been raised in the English papers against the terms of the proposed treaty. This treaty was said to have thwarted the hopes of the British tea planters in India, of helping themselves to much good land in Bhutan on its annexation. Lawrence himself was strongly against the wholesale annexation of Bhutan mainly on two points. First, such an action was likely to cause an alarm in Tibet; and, secondly, the economic potentiality of Bhutan minus its duars was negligible. Its annexation, felt Lawrence, would cost more than it was worth at any rate⁷⁴.

Thus ended this "unequal war" between the two countries, the Bhutanese being very much at the receiving end. Skirmishes and conflict continued nevertheless with violations of various clauses of the treaty from time to time. Even the

Article IX was occasionally violated, and duties were charged on goods exchanged, against the principle of free trade. For the present, however, the British were highly satisfied with the gains made. "Even if troops had advanced upon Punakha" remarked Lawrence, "we doubt whether terms materially more advantageous than those now imposed would have been dictated to the enemy"⁷⁵.

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