CHAPTER II

Commercial Contacts with the Himalayan Kingdoms — the Prelude

The lure of trade and commerce have drawn men to the most inaccessible parts of the globe, and the mountainous regions of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan were no exceptions to this rule. Though the mighty peaks of the Himalayas and the forests on the mountain slopes made human intercourse difficult, yet the pilgrims and traders constantly passed to and fro through the river valleys and the narrow passes that provided links with the outer world.

Pre-British Trade Relations with the Himalayan Kingdoms

Since very ancient times, Nepal enjoyed intimate commercial contacts with India as has been confirmed by some ancient texts. Nepal was connected with one sub-way branching off from Pataliputra, which was then one of the centres of the world civilization, with links spread as far as Europe. From Pataliputra three great roads radiated to the frontiers of the empire, with the northern road going to Nepal via Vaisali and Sravasti. Kautilya, in his Arthashastra, has made a mention of Nepal as the principal exporter of woollen goods, pepper, nard, sugar, copper, etc. These goods were in turn exported by India to many outside countries including Rome[1].

Kathmandu played a crucial role and served as an important entrepot in the ancient trade system. Two very important passes, that of Kuti and Kerung, were near the Kathmandu valley connecting Kashmir, Kathmandu, Patna, and Lhasa routes. In so far as the climate in Kathmandu was concerned, it was good and rather congenial for both highlanders and plainsmen[2]. During the medieval period, although not much is known about the nature of Indo-Tibet and Indo-Nepalese trade, nevertheless, there can be little doubt that some kind of contact, presumably through trade and commerce was maintained. Though communication between

India and Nepal was not as smooth and frequent as it had been in the ancient times, apparently due to religious differences of the ruling dynasties, trade between these two countries still continued, though probably not as much as in the ancient times. It was also during this period that Nepal developed and maintained close and intimate relations with Tibet[3].

Contrary to the traditional belief that Tibet was a closed country especially to the west, evidences go to prove that the western world had acquired a considerable knowledge about Tibet from a very early period in history. During the reign of Augustus Caesar of Rome, a trade route ran across the Himalayas, by which silk from China reached India through Tibet and thence found its way to the Roman Empire. Ptolemy also knew of the Tibetans whom he called the 'Bautae' probably from the Tibetan 'Bod'. Several travellers in the middle ages, both from Christandom as well as from the Islamic lands had described Tibet in some details during the course of their travels, among whom Marco Polo and Ibn Batuta deserve mention[4]. Travernier had observed that several sorts of drugs were brought from Tibet to Patna, particularly rhubarb and musk. The merchants from Patna carried back to Tibet precious stones such as yellow amber, bracelets of tortoise shells, and other sea shells. Travernier also described in some detail the caravans that

set out from Patna to Tibet. These caravans, after reaching the foot of the mountains, travelled through thick forests, and ultimately passed through Nepal to reach Tibet[5]. Even in later years, civilians were permitted to go to Tibet as may be made out from an account of a wealthy and adventurous Dutch merchant, Samuel Van der Putte, who travelled between 1725 and 1735 from India to China and back again to India. On both the journeys he had passed through Lhasa where he is said to have stayed a long time[6].

Another interesting description of Lhasa has been given by an anonymous writer, a gentleman who resided in Lhasa for many years. This account has been found in a volume by Bartholomew Plaisted, entitled, 'A journey from Calcutta in Bengal etc. etc. to England in the year 1750'. A map of the countries, cities and towns adjacent to Bengal, was prefixed to this volume and Lhasa (or Lossa, as it was spelt then) was placed on the northern side of the map and was described as the capital of the kingdom of Tibet. It was said in this account that not much was known of the plants and animals of Tibet, nor what advantages could be drawn from that country by way of trade. It was however, mentioned that Bengal was in close contact with this country and that the road from Bengal to Lhasa had been known since a long time[7].

In fact, till as late as 1792 when the war between the Tibetans and the Gurkhas resulted in the closing of all passes through Nepal, substantial trade was carried on between India and Tibet. The chief Indian exports to Tibet comprised of cotton and silk fabrics, spices, broad cloth, hardware, pearls, coral, amber, ~~and~~ chank (Shankha) etc. and the imports were gold, musk, woollen cloth and tails of cows[8].

The Trade and Economy of Bhutan

Bhutan was however, a comparatively lesser known country than either Tibet or Nepal. Yet within the Himalayan regions and with her neighbours, Bhutan maintained fairly regular inter-relationships, particularly in trade and in religious matters. In the maintenance of inter-Himalayan contacts, Tibet was the focal point, and her second closest neighbour of course was India. Most of the foreign trade of Bhutan to Tibet in older times was conducted through Paro by way of a low pass, the Tremo la, to Phari Dzong. The valley of Paro was very fertile, its principal crops being rice, wheat, millet and potatoes. Paro had direct trade links with Tibet, and so had the Tazgong valley in eastern Bhutan which was also very fertile with its products of rice, maize, silk and fruits. There was also another

route from Punakha to Gyantse and Shigatse in Tibet through the Mo Chhu (Sankosh river) valley. The Tazgong valley connected the Dozam valley to Shingbe. The trade from eastern Bhutan to Tibet generally followed the course of Lhobrak and Dozam rivers[9]. From very ancient times, this trade between Tibet and Bhutan was carried on through the above mentioned routes. Bhutan exported rice, fine silk, fabrics, dyes, brass utensils, musk, madder, coarse blankets & thin quilted cloths to Tibet, and brought in salt, soda, wool, gold dust, silver, tobacco, betelnuts and other articles of consumption[10].

Bhutan also had direct trade links with India, particularly with Bengal. Paro had a communication with Bengal by the Dalimkot and the Buxa Duars. Indo-Bhutanese trade was also carried on through the Chumbi valley in Tibet. Some of the merchandise was carried on to Rangpur in Bengal, and some to other places through Dewangiri and Samchi on Bhutan's southern frontier[11]. Herbs, spices and medicinal plants had always been a Bhutanese export. In some ancient Tibetan texts Bhutan has been referred to as the 'Lotus Grove of the Gods'[12], and 'Realms of Healing Herbs' which go to prove the popularity of the Bhutanese herbal medicines.

Bhutan was also referred to as 'The Four Districts of South Mon' in the old Tibetan texts. The significance of

the name of southern Mon has already been explained, and the four districts were as follows - to the north was situated Punakha, also known as 'the blooming vale of luxuriant fruits of the south'. As the name indicated there were an abundance of fruit trees in this region, which included mandarins, bananas, citrus fruits, together with sugar cane and bamboo. These trees were further surrounded by dense forests of fir, which had orchids hanging from their branches. To the south lay another district called Pasamkha (modern Buxa). It was considered a very profitable place for commerce and in the olden Tibetan texts had been referred to as 'the goal of all desire' or as 'the end of the rainbow district of all desires'[13]. To the west lay Dalikha or the region of walnut trees. It comprised of the modern town of Kalimpong, which had once belonged to western Bhutan. As the name implied, a large number of walnut trees were seen in this district and walnuts probably formed an export item from Bhutan. Finally to the east lay 'Dungsamkha' or 'the land of longing and of the silver pines', where a bazar was held later quite frequently[14].

These elaborate and artistic names of the various regions of Bhutan, conjure upa vision of a place which was indeed quite a profitable trading mart, and carried on commercial activities, in the main, with Tibet on one hand,

and with Bengal and Assam on the other. There were routes connecting Bhutan with Sikkim and Tibet which led up as far as China on one side, and with places such as Cooch Behar, Rangpur and Goalpara in Bengal and Assam, on the other. The small town of Cooch Behar in North Bengal started developing as a commercial entrepot from the sixteenth century onwards where traders from Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim and India met and exchanged their goods. This trade was in all probability the mainstay of Bhutanese economy and was supposed to have sustained her through out the centuries. From earliest times the inhabitants of Bhutan, namely the Mons and the Khens, were in contact with the people of the plains of Bengal and Assam. They used to bring their sheep and cattle down to the plains for grazing in winter, and also to barter their butter, yak tails, blankets and other hill products, for procuring their daily necessities like salt, steel etc. from the plains[15]. The place where these Mon people met the plainsmen and exchanged their wares was in all probability Cooch Behar, which has been mentioned as being an intersecting point in the trade route of India, Bhutan & Tibet.

The first definite reference to Bhutan's commercial activities with India in particular, can be found in the observations of an English merchant traveller, Ralph Fitch, who had visited many adjacent regions to Bhutan, as early

as 1583-84. Fitch's story of his experiences was first given to the world by Richard Hakluyt, in the second edition of his 'Principal Navigations'. Ralph Fitch arrived in Cooch Behar in 1583 after a long and adventurous journey. He had originally set out from London, to meet the Indian emperor Akbar, with a letter from Queen Elizabeth I. He arrived at Agra in 1584 and from there went to Fatehpur Sikri where Akbar resided. He sought an interview with the Emperor to present his sovereign's letter. But it is not known whether this interview ever took place or not. However, from Agra, he came to Bengal via Allahabad, Benaras, and Patna with a fleet of 180 boats laden with merchandize. He then came to Malda and thence on to Cooch Behar[16]. Fitch has given an interesting description of Cooch Behar, which he visited. In his own words :-

> I went from Bengala into the country of Couche, which lieth twenty five days journey northwards from Tanda. The King is a Gentile, his name is Suckel Counse. His countrey is great and lieth not far from Cauchin China, for they say they have pepper from thence. The part is called Coochegate. All the countrie is set with bambos or canes made sharpe at both the endes and driven into the earth and they can let in the water, and drowne the ground above knee deeps so that men nor horses can passe. They poisen all the water if any wars be. Here they have much silke and muske and cloth made of cotton. The people have eares which be marveilous great of a span long, which they draw out in length by devises when they be yong. Here they be all gentiles, and they will kil nothing[17].

The above description, though meagre, and in some places prone to exaggeration, gives ample proof to show that Fitch had really visited Cooch Behar. William Foster, editor of the book 'Early travels in India 1583-1619', is of the opinion that Fitch's visit to Cooch Behar was a most interesting incident. He is inclined to believe that the term 'suckel counse' may be interpreted as white Koch (Sanskrit equivalent of white being sukla and counse may be interpreted as Koch). It should however, also be noted that Sir Edward Gait in his 'History of Assam', is disposed to regard this term 'Sukel Counse' as being equivalent to Sukladhvaj, a title borne by Silarai, the famous brother of King Nar Narayan. There is however the difficulty that Silarai had died a few years before Fitch's arrival. The statements about the proximity of Cochin China and the importation of pepper from thence, opined Gait, must be based on some misunderstanding, or a wrong information furnished to Fitch. 'Cachegate', according to Gait, was a tract of land on the north of Cooch Behar, forming the eastern portion of the present district of Jalpaiguri[18]. In fact the name Chechakhota is still borne by a taluk in that region, near the town of Alipurduar.

In all probability Ralph Fitch did not venture further northwards from Cooch Behar. He had not actually visited Bhutan, but was said to have 'heard' of that country and

of the quite extensive trade which existed between Bhutan and her neighbouring countries. A full quotation of Fitch's description of Bhutan, and the trade carried on by her at that time is reproduced here -

> There is a country four daies journie from Couche or Quichen, before mentioned, which is called Bottanter and the citie Bottia, the king is called Darmain, the people where of are very tall and strong and there are merchants which come out of China and they say out of Muscovia or Tartarie. And they came to buy muske, cambals, agates, silke, pepper and saffron like the saffron of Persia. The country is very great, three months journey. There are very high mountains in this country and one of them so steep that when a man is six daies, journey off it, he may see it perfectly. Upon these mountains are people which have eares of a spanne long if their eares be not long they call them apes. They say that when they be upon the mountaines, they see ships in the sea, sailing to and from, but they know not from whence they came nor whether they go. There are merchants which come out of the East, they say from under the sunne, which is from China which have no beards and they say there it is something warme. But those which come from the other side of the mountains which is from the north say there it is very cold. These northern merchants are apparelled with woollen cloth and hats white hosen close and bootes which be of Moscavia or Tartarie. They report that in their country they have good horses, but they be little, some men have foure, five or six hundred horses and kine, they live with milke and fleshe. They cut the tails or their kine, and sell them very deare, for they be in great request and much esteemed in those partes. The haire of them is a yard long, the rumpe is above a spanne long, they used to hang them for braverie upon the heades of their elephants, they bee much used in Pegu and China. They buie and sell by

> scores upon the ground. The people be very swift on foote [19].

The above quotation again in spite of some exaggerations and far fetched ideas, does give a picture of a country called Bhutan —— 'Bottanter' or 'Bottia' —— which was about four days journey from 'Conche' or 'Quicheu' which was modern Cooch Behar. An idea can also be formed of the commercial intercourse from the mention of merchants from China, Persia and Tartary, selling and buying articles such as musk, blankets, agate, silk, pepper, saffron, horses, and yak tails. The fact that these were all articles of commerce is all the more evident since in later times, these very articles were used as items of export and import. Even as late as 1815, Kishen Kanta Bose who visited Bhutan, reported that 'Bootan produces an abundance of Tangun horses, blankets, walnuts, musk, chowries or cowtails, oranges and manjeet (madder) which the inhabitants sell at Rangpore'[20]. The similarity of articles mentioned by Fitch and later by Bose may be noticed. The mention by Fitch of merchants cutting off the tails of their mares and selling them at a high price (they cut off the tails of their kine and sell them very deare) had also been reported by Samuel Turner, a British official who visited Bhutan in 1783[21]. Thus the similarity of incidents and goods mentioned above, may be construed

as implying that commercial contacts between Bhutan and her neighbouring countries were not negligible even in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Moreover this trade was still being continued when the official British missions were sent to Bhutan in the 18th and the 19th centuries.

Two Portuguese Jesuit Fathers, Estevao Cacella and Joas Cabral were the first Europeans who actually visited Bhutan in 1626. At the time of their visit Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651) the first great historical figure in Bhutan, was ruling. The Portuguese Fathers met this great ruler and presented him with a few guns, gun powder and a telescope. Their descriptions throw light on Bhutan's trade not only with the plains of Bengal and Assam but also with Tibet and China. Even though their fascinating account is not available in full, some of their observations can be obtained from Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia by C. Wessels. These two Fathers stayed in Paro and Thimphu and were cordially welcomed by the Bhutanese as the 'Pandits from the far western world'[22].

Cacella noted that in those days a place called Hajo in Assam was very populous and rich. One factor which explained the importance and prosperity of Hajo was that it was the terminus of two important trade routes through the Manas valley and the Tawang pass. The latter did not

pass through Bhutanese territory and was a direct commercial artery with Tibet. In this connection it may be mentioned that Pemberton a British official who had visited Bhutan in 1838 found the Khampas of Eastern Tibet carrying on traffic along same routes. The Jesuit fathers had passed through Cooch Behar on their way to Bhutan and Cacella had described Cooch Behar as a flourishing trade mart. The town, he said was very populous and plentiful, provided with things which the country (meaning Cooch Behar) itself possessed, and some of which came from Patna, Rajmahal and Gaur (modern Malda). Therefore, at the time of the visit of these Portuguese fathers to Bhutan, both Hajo and Cooch Behar were undoubtedly focal points of Bhutan's trade with the plains. Regarding items of merchandise from Bhutan, Cacella further said that Bhutan was 'well provided with Chinese merchandise such as silk, gold and porcelain'[23] and these Chinese items available in Bhutan found their way to the plains as export items.

Trade routes had existed for many centuries on the north and west between Bhutan and Tibet, and on the south between Bhutan and the neighbouring provinces of Assam and Bengal in India. The inhabitants of Ha and Paro in western Bhutan traded with the Tibetan inhabitants of the Chumbi valley and Phari. The most important of all the trade routes between India and Tibet took off from Kalimpong in

the district of Darjeeling crossed south eastern Sikkim and entered the Chumbi valley by the Jelep La. Thence it proceeded up the Chumbi valley to Phari[24]. From ancient times until the middle of the twentieth century, most of the trade between western Bhutan and Tibet was carried on by this route. A nineteenth century British treaty with Tibet provided for the opening of the Indian trading post at Yatung, which became the chief market for exchanges with India. Here the trade routes from Paro, Thimphu and Punakha met the Kalimpong-Lhasa route between India and Tibet. This trade was hampered to some extent by Bhutan's difficult terrain, dense forests, and lack of communications. The trade with Tibet also fluctuated with the political vicissitudes of Tibet. It was usually suspended whenever China established its effective control in Tibet[25]. There also existed a number of routes between India and Bhutan for merchants to carry their merchandise to and fro. The entire mountainous territory of Bhutan is dissected by numerous rivers and their tributaries. The principal trade routes between Central Bhutan and India follow the valleys of the main rivers. The Manas river valley was one such important trade route connecting Bhutan with Assam and Bengal[26]. Besides there was another direct route from Jalpaiguri to Dalimkot, which was a three day march and passed through Karanti and Chukladari. From the latter place another road led to Punakha. Similarly from Darjeeling too, a

six-day march route led to Dalimkot fort. From Dalimkot it was a fourteen day march to Paro, and the route passed through the Mo Chhu river, Sombe, Saibi, Tagong la and Ha, then a three days march led to Punakha through Pimethang, Tshalumarphi and Piumzend. There also existed another route to Punakha from Rangamati, a fourteen days march which passed through Kulduba, Kultab, Buxaduar, Chukha fort and Thinleygang fort. Besides the external routes, which connected Bhutan to the neighbouring countries, there existed various internal routes within Bhutan, connecting one district with another. Punakha was connected to Tongsa by a six day march route which passed through Phangyul Santigang and Tashding. From Bijni another route of eighteen days march led to Punakha passing through Brijhura, Sidli, Zalinghar, Bissusing, Dubleng, Chirang, Borgang and Wangdiphodrang. A six day march route also connected Sidli with Tongsa[27]. It should be pointed out that the word 'trade route', does not connote a well made road. The tracks along which the caravans passed were some times very rough. But it also took a great deal to daunt the perseverance of the baggage animal be it yak, donkey, mule or sheep.

The various provincial rulers of Bhutan, who were endowed with enormous powers, had considerable rights to trade as well. The Dharma and the Deb Rajas themselves

also traded extensively, and were, in fact, referred to as the 'biggest traders' in Bhutan. The four main provincial governors namely the Thimphu Ponlob, the Paro Ponlob, the Tongsa Ponlob and the Punakha Dzongpon, were all endowed with considerable trading rights. It has been said that since the expenses of the Thimphu Ponlob was heavy, he was given a great deal of trading rights to enable him to meet some of his expenses. The Paro Ponlob was regarded as the gurdian of defence and of the trade routes to Tibet and India, on account of the strategic location of Paro. He held the rights of trade and taxation out of which he met the cost of the administration of his province. The Tongsa Ponlob also had extensive trade rights in India and Tibet to sustain the expenses of the government of Eastern Bhutan. The Punakha Dzongpon also had considerable trading rights to supplement the provincial revenue[28]. Kishen Kant Bose, who visited Bhutan in 1815, corroborated the above statement, as to who the traders were. The local officials, ministers, councillors and provincial Ponlobs all held the privilege of commercial activities either privately or on behalf of the government. In the Bhutan Duars there existed an ancient custom by which a person could acquire the right of trade by a written agreement on payment of a tax named the gaongiri. Thus it is evident that all important factions

of the population of Bhutan were involved in trading to a greater or lesser degree.

Most of the trade mentioned above, was carried on by the barter system and money did not mean much to most Bhutanese. As a result of the barter economy, the dzongs which served as revenue collection centres in Bhutan were full of home spun cloth, rice, wheat, butter, and dried yak meat[29]. However in the second decade of the nineteenth century the government of Bhutan struck a crude silver coin called Deba. The circulation of this coin was more or less confined to western Bhutan. In southern Bhutan it was the Narainee rupee, a currency of Cooch Behar, that was circulated. After the establishment of the hereditary monarchy in 1907, the government of Bhutan started getting its coins minted at the government of India mint at Calcutta[30]. Thus coinage and currency did not play an important part in the trading pattern of the Bhutanese especially in the early period which was mostly by the barter system and exchange of precious metals.

Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the first great historical figure of Bhutan, had in fact laid down certain trade regulations to be strictly adhered to by all merchants. It was laid down in the code that all barter or trading should be carried on at fair and prevailing rates, and not at extortionate and preferential ones. Forced gifts of

butter or salt were also strictly forbidden. The other rules to be followed in the transaction of trade and commerce was as follows :

> The headman should inspect the product of the country industries, and see that they are honest and solid in the make and texture. The merchants who have the responsibility of the import trade at the different marts must also satisfy that they get good things, and all traders must obey the state merchant in these particulars. Any one acting in defiance of these rules, or altering their meanings or attempting detention or miscarriage of such orders issued from the seat of the government shall be dealt with severely, in as much as they shall be deprived of their sight or life by decapitation[31].

The desire of the Shabdrung to carry on commercial transactions in a free and fair way is evident from the above quotation which is also illustrative of the fact that trade must have occupied an important place in state management right from the very beginning.

Besides trade the economy of the Bhutanese has been based mainly on agriculture and animal husbandry. Small cottage industries also helped in making the Bhutanese economy largely self sufficient. It will not be out of place here to give a general description of these other mainstays of the Bhutanese economy.

Ninety five percent of the population of Bhutan lived on agriculture and cattle rearing. Diverse climatic conditions

allowed cultivation of almost all kinds of corn, and the main crops were maize, rice, wheat, barley, buckwheat, mustard and peppers[32]. It will be seen later that almost all the British envoys who visited Bhutan during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were fairly enthusiastic over the quality of crops grown in that country. Owing to the ruggedness of the terrain, however, farming on a large scale was not possible. Apart from some fertile valleys in central and western Bhutan there was not much arable land, but what ever was there, was put to the maximum use by the inhabitants.

Although pastoral activities were common almost all over the country they were practised mainly in northern Bhutan because of the availability of good pastures there. The Bhutanese especially reared Yaks which not only provided them with cheese and meat but also served as an important means of transport. Yak tails were used as items of export and Yak hair was even imported to England to be used in the plumes of the Life Guards[33]. Besides Yaks, pigs and poultry were also reared in the central valleys and in southern Bhutan. Sheep were also raised especially for their wool, since traditionally their meat was eaten very little.

Small cottage industries, and arts and crafts, also played a role in Bhutanese economy. Especially the Mons of eastern Bhutan excelled in weaving both cotton and woollen fabrics, and their designs were always fascinating and

and colourful. Besides weaving coarse blankets, cotton cloth were also made by the villagers. Leather from the hides of cattle furnished the soles of snow boots. Bowls were neatly turned from various wood. A small quantity of paper was made from a plant described as the Daphne Papyfera. It was in great demand in Tibet and in other adjoining countries practising calligraphy. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the preparation of lac and rubber, both forest products, had became two important industries of this country. Swords, daggers and sheaths, iron spears, arrow heads, charm boxes, pan boxes, cauldrons and agricultural implements were also manufactured from iron, copper, brass or silver.

Besides bowls, which were tuned out from wood available in plenty from the forests, baskets, and other bamboo craft also developed very early in Bhutan. Another important cottage industry which developed was clayware. The Bhutanese were excellent in this trade, and it has been presumed by some scholars that Assam, Bengal and Bhutan must have exchanged their product and technique from time to time[34]. Another, somewhat unknown industry, was the silk manufacturing industry, the raw material for which was available from a number of cocooneries in southern Bhutan.

The Nepal Imbroglio

It bears repitition that commercial relations between India and Bhutan existed long before the advent of the

English on the Indial soil. However, Indo-Bhutanese relation took a definite shape and was formulated on a definite policy when it came under the aegis of the East India Company. One is moreover, on surer grounds of historical evidence, while investigating the course of this complex Indo-Bhutanese relations, with particular reference to the commercial aspect. The East India Company being basically a mercantile organisation, extension of commerce was their primary concern. Soon after the British were granted the Diwani of Bengal on 12 August, 1765, by virtue of which they became the actual rulers of Bengal, they decided to extend the commerce of the state in every way possible. When the officials of the Company turned their eyes to the Himalayan regions of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan, it was with a view to examine what these countries had to offer in way of exchange. They also looked towards these countries as trade routes, and as entrepots for trade with Tibet and China, as well as markets in which to sell their own products.

The Company was further motivated in opening up commerce with these Himalayan states with the hope of augmenting its income. The various states of British India were, at that time, in a state of financial depletion. New sources of commerce were needed to replace the vast drains which were being made annually of the wealth and manufactures of the provinces. Another pressing factor which

probably moved the Directors to seek extension of trade in these Himalayan territories could have been the great Bengal famine of 1770. As a result of the disastrous effects of this famine, almost one third of the total population of Bengal had perished. Trade and commerce came to a stand still; there were no markets, no sellers, no buyers and no commodities either[35]. The company was, therefore, obliged to look around for new pastures. Even though Warren Hastings played the predominant part in opening up Tibet and Bhutan to Indian commerce, events had conspired, as it were,to make this, possible even before Hastings assumed the Governor Generalship of Bengal. Eager to establish a more direct contact with the Newer rulers of Nepal, a British expedition was sent there under Captain Kinlock in 1767. This expedition though militarily disastrous had aroused considerable British curiosity in the lands beyond the Company's immediate territorial domain[36]. Accordingly, the Court of Directors, on March 16, 1768, recommended the obtaining of intelligence as to whether a trade with Nepal was possible, and whether cloth and other European commodities could find a market through that country in Tibet and western China[37]. Another incentive came through a surgeon James Logan who, in 1769, was sent on yet another mission to Nepal, ostensibly to deliver a letter to the Gorkha ruler. In reality, however, Logan had gone to lend support to the claims of the Newar

Chief of Kathmandu, who was then engaged in defending himself against the Gurkha invader Prithvi Narayan Shah. Logan's underlying aim was that by helping the Kathmandu Raja, the British would be able to have access to Tibet through the Raja's terrain, and the Raja's close association with the Tibetan Lama would help to establish trade relations with that country[38].

All these efforts however proved futile for in 1769, the Gurkha Chief Prithvi Narayan Shah captured the three Nepal capitals of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon, one after another, and assumed complete suzerainty of the country. Consequently, the trade which had subsisted for many years between Bengal and Nepal came to a stand still, since, though the Gurkha rulers were willing to cultivate friendly relations with the English, they jealously guarded their country against the English merchants. This blockade provided a vital setback for the commerce of the East India Company, and frustrated the officials who had hoped to link up their China trade through Nepal, and continue the Anglo-Tibetan trade through the same country[39]. The company, determined to continue with this trade, cast about for an alternative route, and its eyes fell on Bhutan, which by its proximity to Bengal, its location in the eastern Himalayas and its closeness to the Chumbi valley appeared to provide the ideal, alternative trade route to Tibet, and

then on to China. It was thought by the Company that if access could be gained to the Chumbi valley through Bhutan, the losses it had sustained in the closure of the other routes could be made good.

Early British Contacts with Bhutan

It is generally claimed that the British East India Company first became aware of Bhutan in 1772, when this tiny mountainous country over ran the adjoining Indian state of Cooch Behar, forcing the latter to seek help from the British government. It is indeed a fact that it was this incident which ultimately led to more intimate contacts between Bhutan and India, but the British had been aware of Bhutan since quite some time back. In 1766, Major James Rennell was ordered by Robert Clive, who had by then laid the foundation of the British political power in India, to survey Bengal and the adjacent regions which had been acquired by the East India Company. Rennell, on completion of his survey, wrote, "We entered the Boutan country and crossed about seven miles of it. I had some thoughts of proceeding ... but finding the natives averse to it ... I judged it prudent to desist"[40]. Thus, the British had come into contact with the Bhutanese as early as in 1766. Not only this, but Major La Touche, the editor of Rennell's

journal, reported that it was actually in 1766 that a conflict arose in Cooch Behar between the Nazir Deo, or the hereditary commander in chief, Khagendra Narayan, and the Bhutanese, over the succession to the throne of Cooch Behar, after the assassination of the infant Raja. Nazir Deo was driven out of the country, and appealed to the English for help, while the Bhutanese had hired the services of the Sanyasis. Thus it would appear that the company sepoys were fighting mercenaries of the Bhutanese, six years before the out break of the so called 'first' Anglo-Bhutanese War of 1772.

Whether the first military conflicts between the British and the Bhutanese occured in 1766, or in 1772, is however of little importance here. The fact remains that the British were aware of the Bhutanese and looked towards this country with a view to extending their commerce. In 1769, a person named Will Mirtle was deputed to the Morung country, a territory near the Cooch Behar - Bhutan frontier to obtain wood for masts, tar, pitch and turpentine. On the death of Mirtle, this task was entrusted to Francis Peacock and James Christie in 1770, on the recommendation of the Directors, with elaborate instructions not to interfere in politics, or dabble in private trade. The enterprise was unfortunate, for they failed to enter Bhutan. Peacock interviewed the Raja of Morung 'Coran Singh' and got from him the sole grant

of cutting firs in his country. The timber he brought down to Calcutta however was pronounced to be inferior in quality - 'rotten at heart, and over weighty'[41].

Again in 1771, the Directors made an enquiry regarding the possibility of the northern trade and of sending explorers to Bhutan and Assam. They sent two public letters to Bengal dated 10 April and 3 May 1771, requesting John Cartier, President of the Calcutta establishment, to "explore the interior parts of Boutan (Bhutan) and Assam and other countries adjacent to Goulparah", in order to determine whether Company's trade might not be expanded in that direction"[42]. The letter written on 10 April, 1771 (reproduced below) may well represent the eagerness of the Directors to explore the commercial opportunities of Bhutan :-

> It having been represented to us that the company may be greatly benefitted in the sale of broad cloth, iron, copper, lead and other European commodities by sending proper persons to reside at Rungpore and to explore the interior parts of Boutan, Assam and other countries adjacent to Goulparah, and as you well know our earnest desire to extend the vend of the staples of this kingdom to as great a degree as possible, we are surprised you have not already made an attempt to carry so desirable an object into execution. You are therefore, required to procure the best accounts possible and give us your opinion thereon[43].

The other letter written on 3 May, 1771, may be presumed to be much in the same vein, and expressing the same ideas.

The Bhutan-Cooch Behar Conflict

At this time, there occured, most opportunately for the British, a dispute between the Raja of Cooch Behar and the Bhutanese, which led to a more direct confrontation between the British and Bhutan, and later afforded the opportunity of closer commercial relations between the two countries. The main brain behind this establishment of closer commercial ties between Tibet, Bhutan and India, was that of Warren Hastings, who assumed the Governor Generalship of Bengal in April, 1772. At about the same time, a particularly ambitious ruler of Bhutan named Desi Shidariva referred to as Deb Judhur by George Bogle, probably enthused by the territorial claims of the Gurkha Raja Prithvi Narayan Shah, over ran Sikkim, and then occupied Cooch Behar.

Now according to certain sources Bhutan's connection with Cooch Behar in fact went back into the middle of the 17th century. It was at that time that the Bhutanese had overran Cooch Behar and adjacent areas. They were expelled after a long struggle with the Cooch Behar authorities, who were assisted by the Mughal Viceroy of the Bihar province. The Bhutanese however retained possession of the Bengal duars, taking full advantage of the loose political control of the local rulers over them[44].

Even though the Bhutanese, had been driven out of Cooch Behar in the seventeenth century, they continued their control over the political affairs of Cooch Behar, by appointing their agent with a small escort of Bhutanese soldiers in the capital of Cooch Behar. Cooch Behar's dependence on Bhutan became again evident, when, in 1730, the Cooch Behar King Upendra Narayan sought the help of Bhutan against the Mughal intrusion in a family feud[45].

Whatever dependence and cordiality may have existed between the two governments in the seventeenth and the early part of the eighteenth century, open conflict occured between these countries in the later half of the 18th century, leading the Cooch Behar government to seek assistance from the British once in 1766 and again in 1772. It was this latter incident already mentioned before, which ultimately led Hastings to decide upon the first commercial mission to Tibet and Bhutan. The Bhutanese led by Desi Shidariva as already said, invaded Cooch Behar in 1770, and took prisoner Maharaja Dhairjendra Narayan and his brother (Dewan Deo). An appeal from the minor king of Cooch Behar, Dharendra Narayan through his minister (Nazir) Khagendra Narayan, evoked prompt response from Warren Hastings, who immediately sent an army under Captain Jones, to subdue the Bhutanese, in the winter of 1773.

Hastings was motivated to send this army under Jones, not with the sole intention of driving out the Bhutanese, and thus liberating Cooch Behar from the clutches of this trouble some neighbour, but also to make sure that some lucrative gains were to be made by the company at the expense of Cooch Behar. In fact, in April 1773, even before the company's troops set out for the expedition, a treaty was signed between the Minister from Cooch Behar, Khagendra Narayan, and the President of the Council. In this treaty the latter 'from a love of justice and desire of assisting the distressed'[46], agreed to send a force consisting of four companies of soldiers for the protection of the minor king and his country against his enemies, under certain considerations.

Under the first stipulation the Raja had to pay fifty thousand rupees immediately to the Company's representative at Rangpur to defrey the expenses of the force. Under the second, in case more than 50,000 rupees were expended, the Raja would have to make it good to the East India Company, but in case any part of it remained unexpended, it would have to be delivered back. Under the third stipulation the Raja, would have to acknowledge subjection to the English East India Company, upon his country being cleared of its enemies, and had to allow his country to be annexed to the

province of Bengal. Under the fourth, he had to agree further to make over to the Company one half of the annual revenue of Cooch Behar for ever[47]. These four articles were the major ones in the treaty signed between the Raja of Cooch Behar and the East India Company, and it implied a virtual surrender of Cooch Behar into British hands. Hastings had probably this idea in view that if trade with Tibet and Bhutan were to be extended, Cooch Behar as one of the doors to the north should definitely be under the control of the company. The whole of the treaty comprising of nine articles (Appendix I) this afforded great advantage to the British since control over Cooch Behar signified not only territorial gains, but commercial ones as well. There was a centre of Tibetan trade in the town of Rangpur, and merchandise worth two to two and half lakhs of rupees were annually exchanged there. The only way of taking these articles was through Cooch Behar, and when hostilities broke out between Cooch Behar and the Bhutanese, this way was closed leading to a great loss to the Company, whose primary concern was that of trade[48]. Hence they felt that by driving out the Bhutanese and establishing a control over Cooch Behar the way for commerce could also be made clear, and with such great advantages at stake, the Company could afford to risk a few military losses.

The outcome of the military expedition sent under Jones in 1772-73 was that the company's force drove out the Bhutanese and invaded them in their own territories. At the close of hostilities, Hastings received a dignified letter of intercession (Appendix II) from the Panchen Lama[49] of Tibet, requesting Hastings to pardon the Bhutanese. This letter was received by the English government on March 29 1774. A Hindu mendicant named Purangir Gossain[50] and a Tibetan named Paima brought the famous letter and some presents to Hastings. In this letter, the Panchen Lama claimed that the Bhutanese, who were a rude and ignorant people, were subjects of the Dalai Lama. This however, has been said to be an exaggeration and historically incorrect. It would seem that although Tibetan religious and institutional impact on Bhutan was considerable, at no time did Bhutan came under the political domination of Tibet. Coming back to the letter by the Panchen Lama, besides an appeal to forgive the Bhutanese the letter also entrusted the full task of explanation of the situation to the Gossain. This he did very well, and succeeded in winning the respect of Hastings. The presents sent to Hastings, together with the letter, included sheets of gilt leather, stamped with the black eagle of the Russian armorial, talents of gold and silver and some amount of gold dust. There were also bags of genuine musk, narrow woollen cloths manufactured in Tibet and silks of China. The chests which contained these were of good

workmanship and were joined together by dove tails[51]. Seeing the excellent handicrafts of the presents, Hastings' desire to extend trading contacts with Tibet and Bhutan was further increased, and he resolved to give a concrete shape to this idea by sending a commercial mission.

Preparations for the Sending of a Mission

Soon after receiving this letter from the Panchen Lama, Hastings entered into a treaty with the new Deb Raja of Bhutan Tshenlop Kunga Rinchen. This treaty (see appendix III) known as the Anglo-Bhutanese treaty signed on 25th April, 1774, conceded great territorial advantages to the British. The Bhutanese offered to give up the whole open country, and limited their claim just to the woods and the lowlands below the foot hills. Moreover there was the promise to carry on duty free trade with Rangpur as before. The Bhutanese, under the clauses of this treaty, also undertook never to ingress into the British and Cooch Behar territories, or afford shelter to the enemies of the British. One of the enemies of the British included the Sanyasis, who had moved into the foot hills of Bhutan in 1772-73, and had strengthened the Bhutanese efforts to resist British advance into their own territory. Notwithstanding the stipulations of the treaty, the Bhutanese-Sanyasi alliance

continued. In fact, the Sanyasis were said to have operated against the British from their sanctuary in Bhutan during ~~as late as~~ the revolt of 1857. Coming back to the treaty of 1774, Hasting had nothing to lose by signing such an advantageous treaty, but he decided to make political capital out of the whole affair by announcing that his decision to come to terms with the Bhutanese was entirely due to his regard for the Panchen Lama[52]. Be that as it may, Hastings, now decided to be generous with the Bhutanese and take this opportunity of extending commercial transactions with Bhutan and Tibet.

Hastings was of the opinion that the opening of new channels of commerce was the only way of making up for the constant drain of money from Bengal. He pointed out in a memorandum that Tibet offered a promising field for commerce. The Lama was friendly; gold, and silver were the medium of commerce and Tibet carried on an extensive trade with her neighbours, Kashmir, Nepal, Bhutan and China. Therefore when an opportunity for coming into closer commercial contacts with Tibet was presenting itself Hastings realised the necessity of seizing it. Since the only road to Tibet, now open, lay through Bhutan, Hastings conceived the idea to enquire the measures by which 'the sales of British staples, may be promoted in the countries of Bhutan Assam etc.'. In fact this idea had been in his mind even before the conflict

between Cooch Bihar and Bhutan occured and, in 1772, Charles Purling, Collector of Rangpur, was instructed to make some enquiries to the above effect. After the investigation, however, Purling came to the conclusion that Bhutan did not offer good possibilities for the establishment of a thriving commerce. 'The Boutans', he said, 'have never hitherto been accustomed to trade with us but in barter for articles which it will never be to the company's advantage to receive'[53]. Hastings however, decided to go ahead with his plans for extension of commerce with Bhutan and Tibet in spite of Purling's unfavourable opinion.

Sammuel Turner summed up Hastings' intentions with the following words -

> "The Governor General himself more readily embraced the opportunity which he thought this occurrence offered of extending the British connexion to a quarter of the world, with which we had hitherto no intercourse, and of opening new sources of commerce, of which our provinces stood greatly in need, to replace the vast drains which were annually made of their wealth and manufactures in supplying the wants of our other establishments and the commercial investments of the company. What specific articles of trade might be drawn from the northern countries, or what physical or political accommodations or difficulties might be found to promote or obstruct it were even beyond conjecture, but under such circumstances it seems an object of much curiosity, well deserving the attention of government, to explore an unknown region, for the purpose of discovering in the first instance, what was the nature of its production, as it would afterwards be when that

> knowledge was obtained, to inquire by what means it might be most effectually converted to advantage"[54].

With precisely this object in view Hastings informed the Board of Directors that he had decided to reply to the letter sent by the Panchen Lama, which would include among other things a general treaty of amity and commerce between Tibet and India. For this purpose a mission was to be sent to Tibet, and George Bogle of the Bengal Civil Services was chosen as the envoy to Tibet and Bhutan. He was to be accompanied by a physician Dr. Hamilton, as well as by Purangir Gosain. Besides, there is also evidence of a Kashmiri named Mir Mohammad Sattar, who also accompanied Bogle[55]. Bogle was carefully apprised of the objects of his mission. His ultimate aim would be to reach the court of the Panchen Lama in Tibet and negotiate with him on the prospects of increased trade and commerce between Tibet and India through Bhutan. It was also Bogle's responsibility to convince the Deb Raja of Bhutan that a passage of goods through his domains, to and from Tibet and Bengal, would only be to his advantage.

Bogle was supposed to meet the Deb Raja, on his return journey from Tibet, and negotiate with him for the passage of goods through his domains. In a letter, written on 9th May, 1774 Hasting's instructions to Bogle on the above matter were very explicit -

> The great object of your mission is as I have explained in my letter to the Deb Rajah, is to open a communication of trade with Tassisudon and through that place to Lhasa and the most distant parts of Tibet. The advantages of such a plan to the Deb Rajah himself cannot escape him. His capital will become the centre of a commerce the most extensive and the most lucrative if properly improved of any in land trade, perhaps in the world and will derive the greatest benefits from it, by being the medium of communication between the communities of Tibet and Bengal. This country is too poor to be an object of conquest and the expense and difficulty of maintaining the possession of it, if it were subdued would be an insuperable objection to the attempt[56].

As far as Hastings instructions to Bogle for the Panchen Lama was concerned, the Governor General was equally explicit and precise. In the letter dated 13th May 1774, informing Bogle of his appointment as envoy, Hastings wrote -

> (a) The design of your mission is to open a mutual and equal communication of trade between the inhabitants of Bhutan and Bengal.
>
> (b) You will take with you samples for a trial of such articles of commerce as may be sent from this country according to the accompanying list marking as accurately as possible the charge of transporting them.
>
> (c) You will inquire what other commodities may be successfully employed in that trade. And you will deligently inform yourself of the manufactures, productions, goods, introduced by the intercourse with other countries, which are

to be procured in Bhutan especially such as are of great value and easy of transportation such as gold, silver, precious stones, musk, rhubarb, munjit etc.

(d) The following will be also proper objects of your enquiry - the nature of the road between the borders of Bengal and Lhasa, and the countries lying between the communications between Lhasa and the neighbouring countries, their government revenue and manners[57].

In addition Hastings also gave Bogle a note of private commissions dated 16th May 1774, containing ten items, pertaining to Tibetan life, communications and especially to trade. He requested Bogle to send back one or more pairs of the goats that produced fine 'shawl wool' from which the famous 'cashmere shawls' were made and one or more yaks since their bushy tails were highly valued in India and 'fetched good prices'. Hastings also asked for walnuts for seed, or a walnut plant, and any other valuable seed or plant, besides any other curiosities, whether natural productions or manufactures, especially the rhubarb and ging seng (Gingsang or Jin San was a drug much used in China for fevers). Another thing which Hastings asked Bogle to find out was, at what particular science or art did the Tibetans[58] excel.

In order to make Tibet and Bhutan acquainted with British Indian goods, Hastings, in addition to some valuable presents, gave Bogle a great variety of articles, chiefly

of British manufacture, which he could produce as specimens of trade in which the Tibetans would be asked to join. Unfortunately the exact nature of these articles sent, cannot be identified. The Tashilhunpoo records merely mention that Bogle offered the Lama 'presents of glass, bottles, etc.'[59].

Thus the stage was all set for the departure of George Bogle on a first commercial mission to Bhutan and Tibet. Though it is true that it was Hastings' quest for commercial adventure that ultimately saw the mission under Bogle set off, plans were afoot for such an undertaking during the Governor Generalship of Verelest. But it was Hastings who gave a practical shape to these nebulous ideas. Hastings seized an opportune moment to open up negotiations with Tibet and Bhutan, and by his conciliatory and cautious policy, succeeded in keeping the doors of commerce, between India and her northern neighbours open. He even tried to keep up his good work by sending a number of missions after Bogle's return and was quite successful in winning over the Panchen Lama and securing certain commercial privileges from both the countries of Tibet and Bhutan.

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The name 'end of the rainbow district of all desires', has been used by Nagendra Singh in his book, Bhutan - a kingdom in the Himalayas, p.5, whear as the name 'the goal of all desires' has been used by Olschak. However, the meaning of these two names remain more or less the same, depicting a prosperous and profitable trading mart.

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50. Purangir Gossain later accompanied Bogle on his mission to Bhutan and Tibet. S.C.Sarkar in his 'A note on Purangir Gossain' in Bengal Past and Present, Vol.XLIII, says that the Gosains were the

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