Chapter - 3

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From the distant past, the exchanges of culture, religion, and art among principal centres of civilization in Europe and Asia took place because of long-distance trade. It is for centuries that certain long-distance trade routes had been in use. The merchants, diplomats and travellers in the first century A.D. travelled the ancient world along the trade routes from Britain and Spain in the west to China and Japan in the east. Those routes enabled transfer of raw materials, food-grains and luxury goods from regions where they were produced in excess to areas where they were in short supply. Certain routes got their names in the process after the names of the products they carried in bulk for a long period. As for example, silk from China and spices from South Asia were exported to both West Asia and the Mediterranean world. The means of transport of large volumes of silk and spices were either pack animals if it was overland or ships in oceans. Cities springing up along these trade routes became wealthy as they not only acted as the trade centers of international character but also acted as active hubs for providing services to traders or merchants. Some glaring examples of such cities, even on the periphery of the Syrian Desert, were Palmyra and Petra. These cities provided transportation means like caravans to traders and the service of policing along the trade route, and in turn became prosperous and wealthy. Such cities have also transformed into cultural and artistic centres providing a platform for mixing and cultural exchange among

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people of different ethnic and cultural origins. It may well be interpreted that trade routes of the Old world were as good as the communications highways of today's globe. Dissemination of arts, science, literature and culture were done by traders who were extremely mobile by the virtue of their profession.[1]

From the early modern era Bhutan had been carrying out regular caravan trade on the rugged Himalayan terrain with Tibet on the north and Bengal on the south. Side by side with the present jurisdiction of West Bengal, the kingdom carried out trade with Assam in those days. These are evident in the contemporary Bengali literature where several Bhutanese commodities are frequently referred, and also in the writings of foreign travellers. In 1626, a foreign traveller noted that Bhutan was 'well provided with Chinese merchandise such as silk, gold and porcelain'[2], and those came through Tibet. According to an eighteenth century document, her annual trade was worth of Rs 200 thousand with Bengal and Rs 150 thousand with Tibet (including China).[3] The trade continued, and perhaps flourished, during the nineteenth century. In this century, we are told of an annual event of Bhutan's royal caravan going to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and also her trade with Rangpur, a business city of contemporary Bengal. The trade seems largely to be of transit character since several export commodities --- salt, gold, tea, pearls and corals, for example --- were not of the Bhutanese origin. Both Bengal and Tibetan goods could be noticed in either route along with the Bhutanese commodities. The transit nature of this trade came in the limelight when the British administration in Bengal temporarily sealed the Bhutan border. It jeopardized the Bhutanese trade with Tibet and China since

[1] Ancient Trade Routes between Europe and Asia.
[2] Referred in Deb, Bhutan and India, p.56.
[3] Gupta, British Relations with Bhutan, p.19.

'in truth the Bhuteahs have nothing to give in exchange for the commodities of other countries.'[4] It is highly probable, therefore, that the Tibetan and Chinese traders could be seen in the Bhutan-Bengal route, and the Bengali traders in the Bhutan-Tibet route. In fact, a sixteenth century merchant Ralph Fitch noted in his travelogue the movement of Chinese caravans in the Bhutan-Bengal trade route. The extent of Bhutan's historical interconnection with Assam is understood from the evidence of seven *duars* (doors[5]) between these two places. All those *duars* were not, however, safe for long-distance traffic. The problem of dense forest stood on their ways, and it was compounded by the settlement of robbers and other anti-social people in their vicinities[6]. Safety was ensured only in the Banska *duar* through which ran, as the evidence in this study suggests, a long-distance trade route between Bhutan and Assam.

The present chapter seeks to identify trade routes of Bhutan with Tibet, Assam and Bengal, and to analyse its various facets. It discusses various travel characteristics in these routes, and describes their origins, destinations, nodes and links. The plan of this study is this. Section 3.1 defines certain concepts that are involved in the trade route study. Section 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 identify the trade route between Bhutan and Tibet, Bhutan and Assam, and Bhutan and Bengal respectively along with its travel characteristics. Major findings of the study are summarised by way of conclusion in section 3.5.

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[4] Eden, Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64, p.129.

[5] The seven duars were Ghurkola, Banska, Chapaguri, Chapakamar and Bijni in Kamrup district and Buri-guma and Kullung in Darrang district. There was another duar, Kuriapara duar, in jurisdiction of Tawang Rajah. For details of these duars see Robinson, Descriptive Account of Asam, p.348, p.294.

[6] Regarding the forest of one such duar Kishen Kant Bose noted that from Bijni to Wandipore the jungle was so high that 'an elephant or rhinoceros cannot be seen in it when standing up,.....In this jungle, when the sun shines, the heat is intolerable, and when sun ceases to shine a person cannot remain in it without a fire on account of innumberable mosquitoes and other insects with which it is filled'. See Bose, Account of Bootan (1815), p.355. For the details of anti-social elements, see M'Cosh, Topography of Assam, p.135.

3.1. Definitions on origins, destination, nodes, link path and trade route

The trade route literature does not formally define certain frequently used concepts. The terms like nodes, links, paths, routes etc are loosely defined, and often used interchangeably. For the sake of clarity, we define certain terms to be used in this study borrowing them from the literature of transportation network modeling that has been growing fast over the past few decades.[7] There is, in fact, a conceptual identity between these two fields. Similar to a transportation network, a trade route is loosely defined as a specific configuration of certain links connecting a given set of origin (O) and destination (D). Two differences are, however, noted. First, trade route usually refers to an extensive coverage between origin and destination across the country boundaries, often across the boundaries of the continents, which developed historically over a long period. The transportation network is, on the other hand, confined to a metropolis, or at best a conglomeration of villages and a city. Secondly, trade routes were developed with a single objective of the flow of trade (though used subsequently for a variety of purposes) whereas the transportation network is constructed for various purposes like journey to work-place, journey to residence, shopping and so on. In this sense, trade route may be considered as a variety of transportation network. We use the following terminology in this study.

Origin and destination: Origin is defined as an important place like a town or a city where commodities were assembled for long distance trade. It might not be the place of production, as understood in the present-day literature of transportation network. In

[7] Florian, 'An introduction to network models', pp. 137-152.

earlier days, the commodities that were exported in bulk, were produced scatteredly in tiny scales in the country-sides, and assembled by traders at a transit point. That transit point is considered here as the origin. Destination is likewise defined as a town or a city where the merchandise was finally sold in bulk. It might not represent the zone of consumption. The consumers might live away from the place where the long-distance trade was terminated. The word 'finally' has been incorporated in the definition to accommodate the possibility of changing hands in transit.

Node: In transportation network, a link is defined as a transport infrastructure that connects two nodes. Thus, nodes are functionally conceived to define the link.

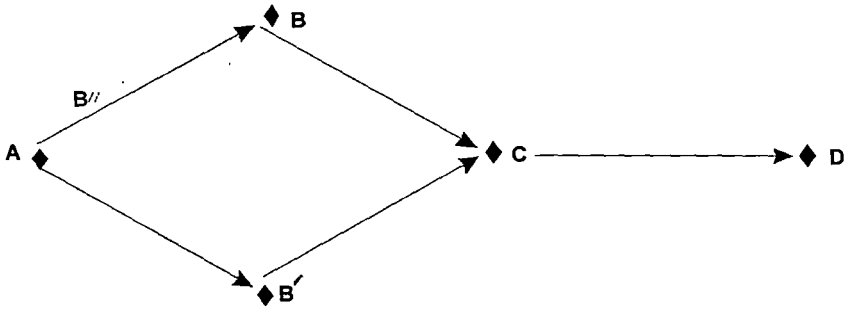

Fig. 3.1

In the above figure, A, B, C and D are the nodes and AB, BC and CD are links. If a node is changed, a different link follows. Thus, once the node is shifted from B to B/, the link is also altered. But any place that comes in between two nodes, such as B//, in the same link is not considered as a node in the transportation literature since it can not perform the function ascribed to its concept. A node is, however, defined here as a place in the trade route that assumed importance in the past owing to the infrastructure supports that it provided to traders such as marketing facilities, convenience and safety for taking rest, availability of food and drinks for the traders as also fodder for pack animals and so on.

Thus, a place like B'' that comes in between two nodes A and B may be considered a node in our study if it provided nodal services to the traders.

Link: A transport infrastructure that connected two nodes is defined as a link. Under the above definition of nodes, the direction of journey did not necessarily change even if a journey shifted from one link to another.

Path: Path is defined as a set of links that connected a given set of origin and destination. There may be more than one path for a given O-D. Thus, for the origin (M) and destination (N), there may be two paths, such as MabN and McN in Figure 3.2.

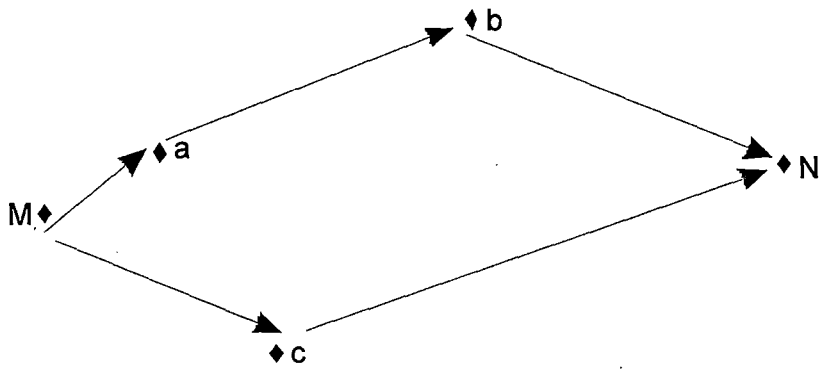

Fig. 3.2

Trade Route: We are now in a position to formally define a trade route. Trade route is a historically evolved network of various paths k, $k \in K$, for a given pair of origin and destination, each path consisting of a number of links a, $a \in A$, and each link interconnecting two nodes, n_i and n_j, $n_i, n_j \in N$. This definition corresponds to that of transport network. That there were a number of paths in the silk roads is recognised in the literature. The German geographer, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), who

coined the term 'silk roads', used it in plural form.[8] "The plural form", according to Christina, "is important because the Silk Roads consisted of a constantly shifting network of pathways..."[9] He further noted, "[I]t is possible to trace in the writing sources several arterial routes [paths, in our terminology] leading from China to the west. They passed through modern Xinjiang (by at least three major routes), through central Asia, and then either through Afghanistan to Kashmir and northern India, or to the Mediterranean..."[10]. The distinction between links and paths in the definition of trade route is, therefore, important for the sake of clarity in the literature.

Since a trade route is, according to the above definition, constituted primarily of paths, links and nodes, the description of a trade route is an account of these constituents as well as their analysis from the viewpoints of the logistic supports that they provide to the trade.

3.2. Bhutan-Tibet trade route

There were four alternative routes between Bhutan and Tibet that traders used at different periods. Those were: Paro-Lhasa, Punakha-Gyantse-Shigatse-Lhasa, Bumthang-Lhasa and Tashigang-Lhasa. Though these routes had a common destination, viz.Lhasa, which happened to be the greatest trade centre in Tibet, they had different origins, viz. Paro, Punakha, Bumthang and Tashigang. These origins assumed different levels of importance in Bhutan's domestic trade at different historical epochs, with their rises and falls being occasioned by frequent enmity and rivalry among their regional chieftains. There were,

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[8] The term he used is *Die Seidenstrassen*. Vide Drege and Buhrer, The silk road Saga Facts on File, p.6.
[9] Christania, 'Silk roads or steppe roads?', p.2.
[10] ibid.

indeed, road linkages amongst them so that gradual diversion of trade from one centre to another was possible. All the routes were not, however, competitive. For instance, the Tashigang-Lhasa route was meant for Assam-bound traffic whereas the Paro-Lhasa route carried Tibetan traffic that were destined to Bengal. The present study takes up the Paro-Lhasa route in view of the availability of requisite data and information, and also the thrust area of this study that includes the Bhutan-Tibet route side by side the Bhutan-Bengal route.

Both in Bhutan and Tibet, the state was grossly involved in the country's external trade so that the benefit of trade went largely to the king, his nobles and other associates including the monasteries. On the Bhutanese trade Peter Collister observed, "[A]ny trade in more valuable goods was entirely for the benefit of the Deb Raja and principal officers".[11] In Tibet, they were, according to F.Grenard, the great nobles and monasteries 'who together with the state were the only merchants on a large scale'[12]. Other similarities were also noticed in the ownership and execution of foreign trade in these countries. First, since the big merchants like the king or his nobles did not participate in the detailed execution of trade, they used to employ trade agents and professional persons to accompany the caravans. These people, therefore, got a share of trade benefits. Secondly, both countries allowed small merchants to carry out trade on their own. They traded mostly with their counterparts in the neighbour countries, but sometimes with their big merchants as well. In the cross-border trade these small merchants disposed of their wares in transit points with a view either to avoiding the hazards in the forward trade, or

[11] Collister, Bhutan and the British, p.21.
[12] Grenard, Tibet, p.286.

in submission to the prevailing custom. The prevailing custom was that a particular group of merchants dominated a given stretch of the route. Thus, for example, the Bumthang merchants controlled the trade route from Bumthang to Lhasa while the merchants of Punakha controlled trade in between Gyantse and Shingatse, and monopolised the carrying trade up the valley of the river Mo Chu to Lingshi La.[13] Lastly, although the major trade was carried out by the state in both the countries, production was left entirely to private enterprises. Productive activities, basically primary in nature, were undertaken by farmers who sold their output in local markets to the state agents, the Lamas, the grandees and foreign traders. Traders had no large stake in production. Purchasing goods from local markets, they 'fit out large caravans to carry it to places at several months' march.'[14]

Although temperature during the winter dipped into the freezing zone in the Himalayan kingdoms, it was by far the best season for caravan trade. The scope of rain was least; also the river beds were dry so that the caravans could smoothly proceed along those beds minimizing their toil and fatalities. Food was cheap, especially barely, meat and wine, and easily available in the route-side localities.[15] Also, this was the season when farm activities were slack, and farmers had time to vend their crops and to opt for subsidiary jobs. In Tibet, for example, farmers in winter 'proceeded to northern Tibet to lay in their stock of salt, obtained from the salt lakes that found there. Then these men start for Bhutan, Nepal or Sikkim, to sell their goods in those places.'[16] Despite snow and

[13] Karan, Bhutan, p.47.
[14] Grenard, Tibet, p.286.
[15] Das, Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet, p.85.
[16] Kawaguchi, Three Years in Tibet, p.458.

frost in the route, therefore, 'winter was the best season to travel to Lhasa'[17] for the purpose of trade. The average temperature was around 2^0 C in this season.

Caravans were led, human beings apart, by a host of animals like mules, ponies, horses, yaks, sheep etc. who could negotiate the narrow rugged paths in mountains. On the point of pack animals, however, differences were noticed between the Bhutanese and Tibetan caravans. Horses dominated the caravans of Tibet as those were low-cost animals there. Because of their cheapness, even the Tibetan farmers employed them for carrying loads from the field – a feature never found in Bhutan.[18] Bhutanese caravans, on the other hand, were dominated by human beings, especially the woman folk. Turner wrote, "The modes of conveyance here [in Tibet] for baggage are altogether different from the usage of the inhabitants of Bootan, where every thing, without exception, is loaded upon the shoulders of the people, and where, to their shame be it spoken, the women bear the heaviest share of so laborious an employment."[19] Similar was the opinion of Bogle. He reported, "The only way of transporting goods in this hilly country [Bhutan] is by coolies."[20] Unlike porters in the plain who carried loads on the head, Bhutanese porters fastened the burden upon their backs with a short stick in hand to support it at the time of rest. Even a girl of eighteen years of age could carry a weight of 70-75 pounds, and marched at 15-18 miles speed a day. This job was not, however, class-specific in the Bhutanese society. When caravans passed through a village, its dwellers were recruited at the behest of its headman, and were relieved at the next convenient village of recruitment. There was no market rate of wage for this unskilled job; the pleasure of the caravan-

[17] Das, Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet, p.85.
[18] Mehra, Bhutan, p.18.
[19] Turner, An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet, p.208.
[20] Ramphell, Bhutan through the Ages, vol. 2, p.148.

master was all what determined it. "This is a service so well established that the people submit to it without murmuring. Neither sex, nor youth, nor age exempt them from it."[21]

Both the Bhutanese and the Tibetans extensively used yaks in their caravans. Because of their heavy body weight and shorter legs, these animals could easily negotiate the rugged mountain passes against strong winds and water currents. They were also least selective in their diet, being satiated with whatever grass, soft or hard, was available wayside. The caravan-master was thus relieved of arranging fodder when yaks were in job. They evidently marched 9-10 miles a day in mountains and at about 16 miles on the plain though horses could run at double this speed.[22] Caravans of sheep were, however, generally popular among the nomads in hills. Similar to other historical trade routes in the world, the traders in these Himalayan tracks preferred larger size of caravans presumably on account of the economies of scale and also out of fear from brigands. A source suggests that each caravan in these routes consisted at least of eight hundred animals and ninety men.[23]

Exports from Bhutan consisted of her domestic products like rice, woollen cloth, *munjeet* (a type of dye) and wrought iron as well as imported products from Bengal such as English broad cloth, indigo, tobacco, coral, leather and sandal-wood. Since Tibet was sterile in grain crops, her people necessitated for their livelihood the import of rice, both boiled and parched, along with wheat and flour. While much of these imports were domestically consumed, some foodgrains were also re-exported 'for the Chinese

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[21] ibid.
[22] Grenard, Tibet, p.289.
[23] ibid, p.287.

functionaries and officials'.[24] Next to food came garments in importance, especially woollen products and broad cloths. These imported garments were fashion only among the nobles, including the *lamas*, as the common people were to satisfy themselves with coarse woollen dresses and cloths, woven domestically. Imported woollen cloths found in addition an extensive outlet in temple decorations. For their cotton garments, however, Tibetan women preferred white colour, in addition to light-blue and russet,[25] and to sustain whiteness in cloths perhaps, the imported indigo was in great demand. For the industrial purpose, again, Tibet imported wrought iron that was manufactured in Bhutan out of her own deposits of iron ore at Paro. This was used for the manufacture of small arms in an arsenal located at Dib near Che-Cho-Ling.[26]

Bhutan's import from Tibet consisted of raw wool, musk, tea, silver, gold, embroidered silk piece-goods and rock salt. Some of these were domestically available in Tibet while others were Chinese in origin. Among the domestic products, gold was an important mineral that was deposited in the form of gold dust at Thokjalung and Chakchak in the Ngare province in western Tibet to some extent, and richly in its central provinces. It so abounded in the country that, according to Huc and Gabet, even 'the common shepherds have become acquainted with the art of purifying these precious metals'[27]. Another important item was musk that hunters gathered from deer. Musk deer inhabited in plenty across the forests in Kong-bo, Tsari and Lo where dwellers hunted them to barter against their daily necessities and ornaments. Although it had low market price in those places, especially at Lo, exorbitant transportation costs were involved

[24] ibid, p.295.
[25] Kawaguchi, Three Years in Tibet, pp. 452-453.
[26] ibid, p.447.
[27] Referred in Macaulay, 'Memorandum on our Relation with Tibet', p.19.

because of high risk and danger from highway robbery—only 'uncommonly adventurous [people] proceeded thither to get a supply from the natives'.[28] Tibetan rock salt was also an item of import in Bhutan which she largely re-exported to Bengal. Bengal had no other source than this though it had high demand on account of prevailing socio-religious and medicinal practices. As noted above, these salts were extensively available in north Tibet. Last but not the least, Tibet was a bulk exporter of raw wool. Rearing of sheep that was a household activity in Tibet substantially generated raw wool. It was partly used domestically in the thriving woollen industry at Lhasa and its surrounding districts, and partly exported to neighbouring countries. About 1500 mule-packs of wool were annually exported to Bhutan in the late nineteenth century.[29]

Paro: The origin

Paro was historically developed as a fort town in a valley. The fort, locally called *dzong*, was constructed more than four centuries ago for the protection of cultivators and also to appoint government officials such as *penlops* and *dzongpons* to administer the country. Under the *dzong*'s protection from wars, internal disorder and natural calamities, an extensive human settlement encompassing various economic activities and institutions including market was developed within a periphery of quarter a mile from this *dzong*. There were long stretches of good arable land in the valley, especially at its lower elevations and in the plain, which afforded the cultivation of rice and wheat. Also, its hill contour a few kilometres away contained significant quantity of iron that was extracted in a naïve way for the purpose of construction and industries. Local people separated iron

[28] Kawaguchi, Three Years in Tibet, p. 450.
[29] ibid, p.448.

from sandy soils by using a magnet, and heaped it for sale as iron dust.[30] In fact, a nearby hill was called Chakolah, i.e. Iron Mountain, because of its iron deposit. In the late nineteenth century, there was an iron ore mine at a distance of two days' journey from Paro.

Owing to its locational advantages, Paro emerged as an important trade centre in the eastern Himalayas. It was connected in the north with Phari, an important commercial town of Tibet,[31] and in the south with Rangpur in Bengal. While describing its locational advantage in the eastern Himalayan trade, Eden observed, "Paro from its situation should be one of the largest cities in the East; situated in a perfectly level plain, easy of access from the low country, ...only two easy marches by an excellent road from one of the chief marts in Thibet, it ought to be the entrepot of the trade of Thibet, Tartary, China, and India".[32] Because of these advantages Paro's market place was dotted with a large number of big depots containing various imported products like broad-cloth, cotton-goods, cutlery, rice, corals, tea, spices, leather, and miscellaneous articles of European manufactures along with rock-salt, musk, gold-dust, borax, and silk.

Lhasa: The destination

Lhasa was the largest as well as the oldest city of Tibet that was set up in about AD 400 by King Srong-tsan-Gampo. The major domestic products such as gold, raw wool, woollen products, rock salt and musk that Lhasa exported, have already been discussed. Among other domestic products that found vent from this place were borax, drugs, ponies, brass utensils and incense sticks. Apart from these domestic goods, a variety of

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[30] Eden, Report on the State of Bootan, p.92.
[31] ibid, p.90.
[32] ibid.

foreign goods were available in Lhasa because of her excellent linkages with two major countries in Asia, viz. India and China, and this ensured her a unique destination for trade between Bhutan and Tibet. On the east, it was connected with China from primeval time. From this path went an extension westwards of Lhasa towards Kashmir and India providing it accessibility to those places. On the north-east, it had a road link with China extending to Manchuria, and on the west with Leh, 'the capital of the farthest outlying province of Kashmir-Ladak'.[33] Its southern border was connected with a number of places in Bhutan, that we have already noted, and also with Nepal and Sikkim.

Lhasa's well-knitted road network with the Himalayan kingdoms generated two important characteristics for her trade. Firstly, a number of non-Tibetan merchants, especially Kashmiris, came to settle in Lhasa, and ran trading enterprises. Akin to the role of the Jews in European trade, the Kashmiris used to play a pivotal role in the east Himalayan trade over China, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Bengal.[34] Secondly, commodities from several countries adorned the markets of Lhasa giving it a cosmopolitan character. China provided it with tea, silk, carpet and porcelain articles, and Mongolia supplied it leather, saddlery, sheep and horses. Rice, sugar, musk and tobacco came from Bhutan and Sikkim, and broadcloth, indigo, brass-works, coral, pearls, sugar, spices and drugs from Nepal. Though a number of goods from Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim were made in India, Indian goods were also supplied there directly through Ladak. In response to the demand from travelling traders in the city, however, a number of hotels and inns sprang up in Lhasa. On the fringe of its every market place one encountered a chain of eateries where

[33] Holdich, Tibet, p.44.
[34] Collister, Bhutan and the British, p.21.

various meats and flour predominated.[35] These eateries revealed the non-resident character of the trading community at Lhasa.

Nodes and links

From Paro the first resting place for Tibet-bound caravans from Bhutan was 14 km away at Dakya Dzong (vide Map 2), a walled fort that was constructed to combat the Tibetan invasion. The intermediate road, moderately ascending, ran through a valley of pines, and horses. Agriculture was only for subsistence there. The *dzong*, however, provided shelter to travelling traders along with their animals in stables. Taking night stay there, they proceeded along the valley towards a Tibetan border, the village Sana, on the same ascending road. Dwellers in this border mostly wove coarse woollens, again with agriculture as their subsidiary livelihood. There was a guard house there 'where a party of Booteah was stationed, who permit no one to pass their frontier, without a passport from the Daeb [Deb Raja]'.[36]

Crossing the border the journey gradually entered into a difficult phase with the road passing through a chain of snow-capped mountains and dense forests. These high inclines were favourite habitats of chowry-tailed cattle which the natives haunted to gather chowry to sell. For taking short rest in this tedious journey often did the travellers sit in cavities of the rocks that sprang naturally on the way. Such a natural shed was Gassa, which, as Turner noted, 'served as a resting place for travellers passing to and fro.'[37] About 21 km march ahead this path led traders to Phari, the first node in Tibet. The land here was rocky so that cultivation was impossible. Only hunting and gathering were

[35] Landon, Lhasa, pp. 275-276.
[36] Turner, An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet, p.183.
[37] ibid, p.193.

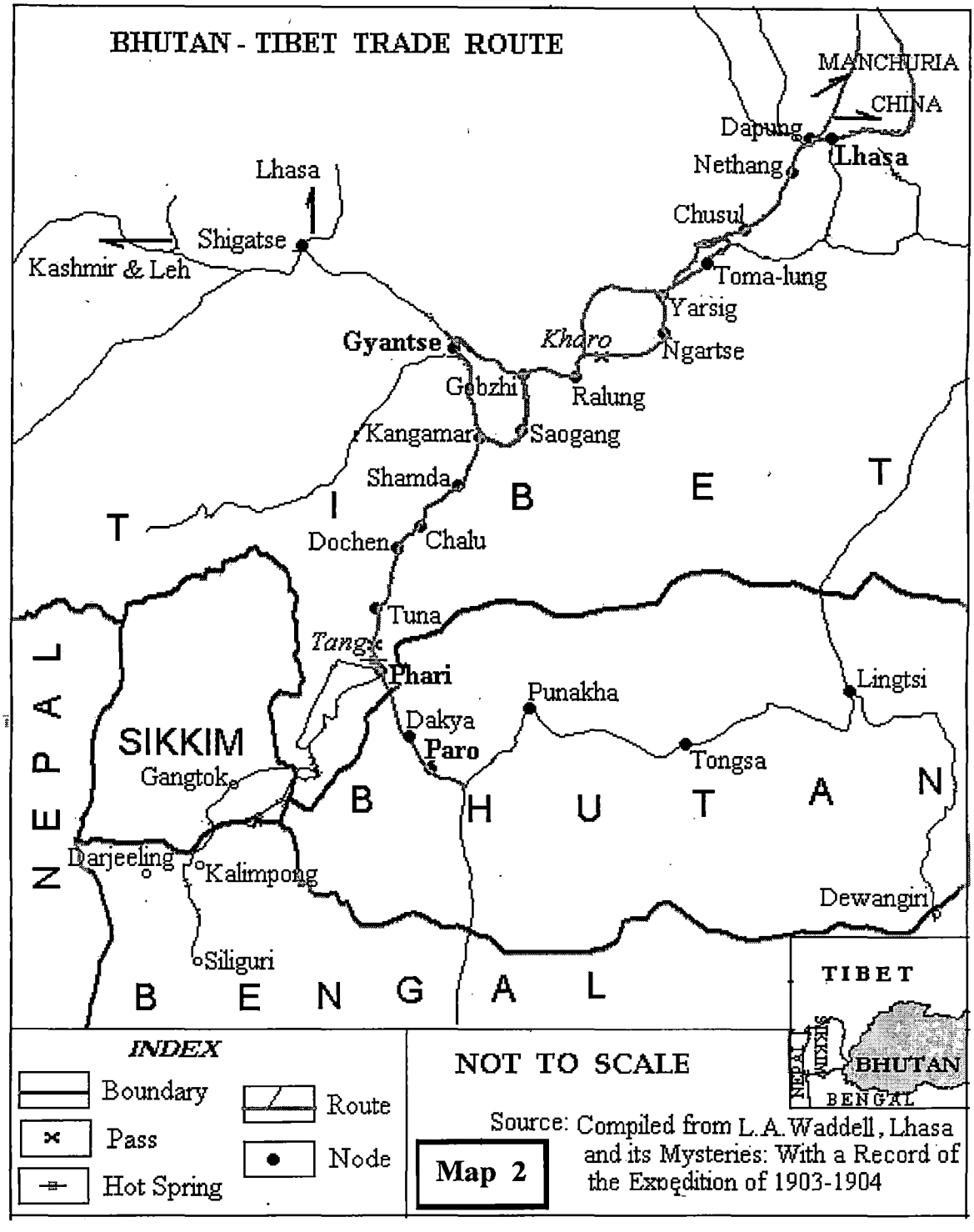
the means of livelihood. Chowry-tailed animal and musk deer were in plenty, and the local people earned on them. There was, however, a fortress in that place where travellers took night shelter. Alternatively, they could proceed five km farther to Chugya to rest at the Chasa Goompha where Phari Lama stayed. He was the most influential person among the herds, and also the governor of a vast range of rocks and deserts.

The next important commercial town in this route was Gyantse, 132 km from Chugya. Several villages stood on this way for the caravans to stay at night. Those were Tuna, Dochen, Chalu, Shamda, Kangamar, and Saogang with distances from each other varying in the range of 12-24 km. Most of them were insignificant hamlets at the mountains' lap. Only Kangmar and Saogang had some importance in the contemporary business. The former's importance was due to its strategic location as a junction of two paths, one proceeding directly to Lhasa and the other via Gyantse (vide Map 2). Since the former was a shorter path, the Lhasa-bound travellers preferred it in most cases. The importance of Saogang was due to the existence of an old fort, and also a monastery, where traders could stay comfortably at night. The road in this stretch, however, ran mostly through valleys. Some of these valleys were extensive while others were narrow. They were cultivable somewhere but dry and rocky elsewhere totally unfit for cultivation. Many springs and lakes came up on the way, and they were hot beds of superstition in the locality. People could read, for example, the evil design of the forthcoming events from the Lake Ramtchieu. Again, a hot spring in between Saogang and Kangamar was believed to cure all the diseases under the sky. Turner wrote, "The virtues attributed to this spring, were various and powerful, not being confined to invalids of any particular description, but extending to all the sick and aged, whether they seek a cure from

infirmity or from disease."[38] Whatever be their superstitious values, there is no doubt that these springs and lakes provided much-needed water to the moving caravans in this route.

The caravan thus reached Gyantse, the 'dominating peak'. It was one of the earliest settlements in Tibet where goods from south Asia were exchanged with those from central Asia. It had road connections with India, Nepal and Bhutan on the one end, and Ladak and central Asia on the other. Caravans, therefore, regularly visited this place from Ladak, Nepal and upper Tibet with goods such as gold, borax, salt, wool, musk and furs for exchange with the central Asian commodities like tea, tobacco, sugar, cotton goods and hardware. Gyantse itself was a great producer of woollen cloth and carpets, and the third largest market for these products in Tibet. For the purpose of exchange, however, traders flocked in an open place at the entrance of a great pagoda. The Monastery levied taxes on goods transacted there, and also on the buildings that surrounded the market accommodating various business activities. Some of the caravans coming from Bhutan terminated here while others progressed further.

[38] ibid, p.220.



A political economic analysis of Indo-Bhutan trade, Deptt. of Commerce, North Bengal University

The next three important nodes were Gobzhi, Ralung and Ngartse (vide Map 2). The distance between Gyantse and Gobzhi was about 24 km, and that between Gobzhi and Ralung about 21 km, both of which were covered in a day's march. For longer distance between Ralung and Ngartse, viz. 30 km, the caravans often took a halt at Zara, 11 km from Ralung. Gobzhi in the Tibetan language, however, signifies 'the four doors'. The place, indeed, represented a gateway to four different routes, three important trade paths to Lhasa and a fourth of lesser significance[39], and these gave it a place of prominence in the contemporary map of trade. A fort stood there to protect the caravan. Trade apart, the settlement also thrived in agriculture with its surroundings cultivated extensively with barley, peas and mustards. Some medicinal plants, especially larkspur and aconite, were also gathered and processed here for export to India.[40] Ralung, the next node, was not, however, that much important from the viewpoint of trade. It was the headquarters of the *Dukpa* Sect of Buddhism that controlled all the monasteries and temples of Bhutan, as well as the Governor of Tongsa who was the temporal representative of the Dharma Raja, the spiritual head of Bhutan.[41] The caravan traders found it a convenient place for rest at night. Ngartse was also preferred for the sake of security and convenience that was ensured by an existing fort.

Four more nodes, however, followed at Yarsig, Toma-lung, Chusul and Nethang (vide Map 2). Their respective distances from one another were 17 km, 20 km, 11 km and 32 km. Of these, Yarsig and Chusul were more important from the viewpoint of trade. Yarsig was significant as it was directly linked to Shigatse, a commercial town of Tibet.

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[39] Waddel, Lhasa and its Mysteries, p.280.
[40] ibid, p.281.
[41] ibid, pp. 283-284.

Some Bhutanese caravans visited Shigatse instead of Lhasa, and also some Bhutan - bound trades were originated there. Chusul was comparatively a larger human settlement where houses were built of stones. It housed two forts, one of which was the old castle of Chusul. Waddel remarked, "These two forts had evidently been of enormous strength, and this marvelously strong natural position ...[commanded] effectually the trade routes from India, Nepal, Bhutan and Shigatse to Lhasa."[42] Nethang was, however, historically a religious place where a number of monasteries and shrines were situated. Of the two remarkable shrines in this place, one was attributed to the King Ralpachan, who ruled during the ninth century A.D., and the other was the tomb of Atisha, the great Buddhist monk from India who migrated to Tibet in 1038 A.D., and reformed Lamaism.

Similar to the previous stretch, the road ran here mostly through disjoint valleys along the rivers that endowed them. While the journey through the valleys was smooth, it became difficult at the confluences of valleys, which were often occupied by the passes or hills. Such a difficult journey was confronted in a nine-km path on a mountain between Gobzhi and Ralung. Waddel noted that more often than not goods fell from pack animals in this steep road, and 'the falling of any load delayed the whole of the column behind it'.[43] Similar challenges were encountered along the Kharo pass between Ralung and Ngartse, and along the Kamba pass between Ngartse and Toma-lung. There was another three-km stretch away from Chusul where the road ran beneath overhanging granite cliffs. So accident-prone was this stretch that on a stone the people engraved their goddess of mercy, the *Tara*, 'who guards the traveller from the dangers of the falling

[42] ibid, p.317.
[43] ibid, p.282.

rocks, and of the seething waters below his path'.[44]

From Nethang travellers were to go for 21 km to reach Lhasa. The journey continued to be risk-prone, and became still more hazardous as the road advanced through undulating terrains of mountains. On this difficult leg was engraved, perhaps for the sake of eternal blessings, a massive rock-sculpture of sitting Buddha facing Lhasa. Only two km ahead of the destination the road finally entered a fertile valley with all evidences of advanced cultivation. The journey became relaxing passing by the side of scattered villages, monasteries as well as wild flowering plants that were much to the resemblance with European wild flowers.

3.3. Bhutan-Assam trade route

Traffic in the Bhutan-Assam trade route accommodates traders of two different origins. There were the Bhutanese traders who travelled down to Assam for the disposal of Bhutanese goods, and treaded back with the Assamese wares to count profit in both ways. The people of Assam were not interested in this journey[45]. The uncomfortable terrain and climate in the hills might have prevented them from such ventures. Secondly, the Tibetans used this route as a path in the Tibet-Assam trade route, a broader network that formed an important leg of the southern 'silk roads'[46]. There was, however, another path in the Tibet-Assam route that by-passed Bhutan. It ran via Tawang, a place directly controlled from Lhasa, to Hajo in Assam through the Kooreah parrah *duar*[47]. Originating from Tawang a road, however, traversed to Tashigang in Bhutan to serve as a link

[44] ibid, p.316.
[45] This is deducted from the evidence that the hill traders returned back from Assam with merchandise. See Hunter A Statistical Account of Assam, vol. 1, p. 143. This is also no evidence in the literature that Assamese traders visited the hills.
[46] Ray,'Trade routes from northern India', pp.118-119.
[47] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.78.

between the two paths of the Tibet-Assam route. These inner-connectivities with Tibet explained why the Tibetan traders, the *Kumpas*[48], dominated traffic in the Bhutan-Assam route. It should be noted that the *Kumpas* were so predominant in this route that some authorities considered as the *Kumpas* even those Bhutanese who lived in tents or in temporary booths, and were employed in the carrying trade down this passage[49]. While going to Bhutan under a political mission, Pemberton noticed several caravans of the *Kumpas* proceeding towards Assam. The missionary counted as many as 400 *Kumpas* in a single stretch of the route[50]. According to his estimate, more than 2,000 *kumpas* were regularly involved in this trade route.

This traffic was not perennial in nature since the bulk of the Assam-bound commodities were traded through seasonal fairs[51]. Though, in most instances, the fairs in Assam were symbolic to some religious festivity, those were by and large the spots of commerce. Assam's annual fair, however, took place generally in the winter, and this timing was convenient for journey in the Bhutan-Assam trade route. Roads were least hazardous during this season. Numerous hilly streams and torrents criss-crossed the route putting challenges to journey during the monsoon. But in winter, they were tame and could be crossed by traders and their animals in safe along with their trade-wares. Many of them even got dried so that traders walked along their beds comfortably rather than going up and down through the uneven terrain of the mountain. The weather in winter was also conducive for journey in this region. This factor should be appreciated in view

[48] Kumpa was the southern portion of Tibet lying between the right bank of the river Tsanpo and the northern ridges of Bhutan. See for details Rennie, Bhotan and the Story of the Doar War, p.7.
[49] Robinson, Descriptive Account of Assam, p.347.
[50] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.19.
[51] Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, pp. 143-145.

of heavy rainfall in the places *en route* the journey. The average rainfall was 254 cm in the hills and 178 cm in the plain during the rainy season[52] that extended over seven months from March onwards[53]. The travellers should, therefore, complete their journey before the monsoon set in. In his tour-diary Pemberton wrote, "They [the *Kumpas*] return homewards during the months of February and March, taking care to leave plains before the return of the hot weathers or rains, of both of which they entertain the most serious apprehensions."[54]

Pack animals were the only means of transport in this mountainous route. Ponies and mules were employed more frequently for the purpose. Bhutan breed the best pony, namely the *Bhutia Tangun* breed[55], in the early nineteenth century, and those were evidently in great demand even in the plains of Bengal. Traders preferred this animal as they could easily negotiate the rugged terrain of the route, seeking assistance only in steep ascents and descents. Griffiths noted that the Bhutanese ponies were spirited, and understood their duties perfectly. In the line of the march, they proceeded orderly especially when the road was uneasy. They could march in such roads at a speed of about 2.5-3.2 km per hour. "In difficult ascents", he observed, "they are assisted by pushing up and in descents they are equally assisted by vigorously pulling at the tail."[56] In later years, however, their quality was deteriorated for the want of well-built stallion which were exclusively employed in officialdom, and they became, according to Eden, 'vicious,

[52] Imperial Gazetter of India, vol. XI, p.183.
[53] Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, p. 95.
[54] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.79.
[55] Eden, Report on the State of Bootan, p.124.
[56] Griffiths, Journal of the Missions to Bootan in 1837-38, p.328.

obstinate, weedy, wretched, animals compared with those of Thibet and Sikhim.'[57] Their prices also became 'exorbitant' as the mares began to be widely used for the purpose of domestic carriage in the countryside. The mules were, however, relatively cheaper. Sometimes, they were raised by crossbreeding the Bhutanese pony and the Tibetan ass, but more frequently, they were imported from Phari in Tibet. Their price in Tibet was reportedly as cheap as Rs60-70.[58] They were 'really magnificent', as Eden described, and he 'never saw finer or handsomer animals of this class.'[59] But these mules were more vicious and less manageable than the ponies. Ponies and mules apart, sheep, goats and asses were also found plying in this route with cargo. Available information suggests that the Tibetan breeds were superior in this class of beasts. The Tibetan sheep, for example, could carry a load of 15-20 kg each as against the carrying capacity of 6-12 kg for the Bhutanese sheep and goat.[60] The ass was, however, the most robust animal capable of carrying about 40 kg each. But they were employed exclusively for carrying salt in this route. The *Kumpas* of Tibet also employed the ewes and the yak as the beast of burden but their uses were limited.

A striking variety was evident in the commodities of exchange between Bhutan and Assam. Table 3.1 gives a glimpse of this diversity. It is compiled from available information about three contemporary fairs in Assam where the Bhutanese traders largely

[57] Eden, Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64, p.124.
[58] ibid.
[59] ibid.
[60] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.70.

participated. These figures, however, exclude the barter trade that was reportedly extensive in such fairs[61].

Table 3.1: The commodities of exchange between Bhutan and Assam

Bhutanese commodities			Assamese commodities		
Name	Amount	Value(in Rs)	Name	Amount	Value (in Rs.)
Ponies	27 nos.	16,000	Paddy	7,596 mds	6,207
Sheep	131 nos.	393	Rice	6,443 mds	12,596
Dogs	25 nos.	226	Tobacco		36
Yak tails	165 nos.	143	Betel nuts	1,249 pans	278
Bee-wax	158 mds	6,335	Molasses	21 mds	63
Lac	126 mds	1,209	Dried fishes	198 mds	1,958
Dye	11,563 bundles	79	Eria silk cloth	1,207 pcs	9,907
Chillies	223 mds	716	Cotton cloth	1,467 pcs	3,136
Spices	1,354 mds	3,207	Other cloths	2638 pcs	9,471
Walnuts	10,000 nos	31	Brass pots	950 nos	1,887
Rock salt	--	18,825	Iron bars	275 pcs	202
Gold	120 tola	2,400	Others	--	1,685
Blankets	6,673 nos	19,484			
Musks	--	451			
Bhutia rags	841 nos.	421			
Others	--	5,183			
Total	--	75,103	Total	--	47,426

Source: W.W.Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. 1, 1879, pp.143-145

The table shows that ponies, rock salt, blankets, bee-wax, spices and gold dominated the Bhutanese commodities of exchange, and that the Bhutanese traders purchased mainly paddy, rice, eria silk cloth, and various types of cotton cloths. The *Kacharee* tribe of Assam reportedly wove certain varieties of cloth like *dunko lepa* cloth and *kharu* cloth, included under 'other cloth' in the table, exclusively for sale to the

[61] Hunter A Statistical Account of Assam, vol. 1, pp. 143-145.

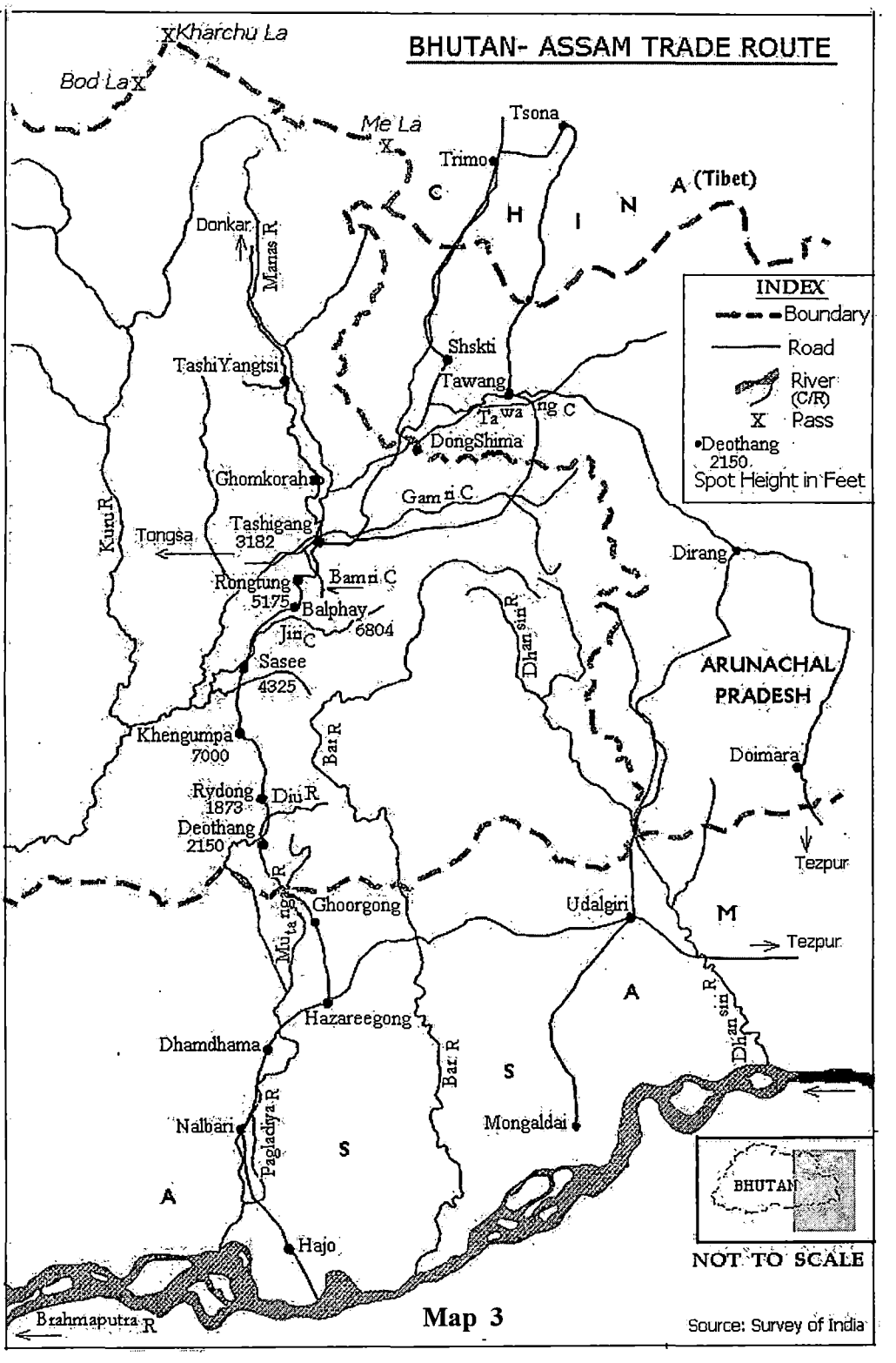
Bhutanese traders[62]. The nature of commodities in this exchange, however, indicates that this trade route gave rise to trans-ecological exchanges. Majority of the goods that Assam exported through this route, as evident in Table 3.1, were the products of advanced human civilisation. The goods from the other end of the route were more of the kind of 'stepeeland or woodland products'. We may cite in this context the products like ponies, yak tails, sheep, dogs etc as the products of the pastoral civilisation, and lac, dye, spice, bee-wax, raw rubber, walnuts, chillies etc as the forest products. While discussing the nature of this exchange Pemberton referred to the list of goods as provided by Ralph Fitch in *Hakluyt Voyages* (1583), and remarked, "[H]owever wonderful the variety of articles which the improved manufacturing skill of Europe now enables the merchants of Bengal to offer in barter for the produce brought down by those of Tibet and Bhutan; the latter bring to the market, in diminished quantities, only the same goods which they imported three centuries ago."[63] The Bhutan-Assam trade route thus corroborates the hypothesis of Curtin that historically the commodities usually passed across the ecological divide.

From the tour-dairy of the missions we gather a fair knowledge about the comparative speeds of travel at different stretches of this trade route. The speed of traffic in this route is expected to correspond to that of the missions since they made the journey with the similar types of animals as the traders. But two qualifications should be noted in this contest that might cause variations in travelling speeds between them. First, the missionaries carried with them only their provisions whereas the traders moved along

[62] ibid, p.144.
[63] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.81.

their cargo. Second, the missionaries were completely foreigners to this land and climate; in contrast, the traders were regular visitors in this route. But since these factors affect our estimation in opposite directions, our judgment is largely balanced. Speed is here measured as the distance travelled per day assuming that each march, as reported in Griffiths's tour-dairy, began at dawn and ended at dusk. With a total distance of 168 km covered in 11 marches[64], the mean speed in this route comes to around 15.3 km per day. Wide variations from this mean value is expected to occur at different stretches of the route because of the differences in their gradients, as seen in the annexed map (vide Map 3). We have estimated that in the hilly terrain, the speed was less than 14 km per day. On the plain, in contrast, it was around 17 km a day. Pemberton himself estimated that the average speed per day was nine miles five furlong (i.e. around 14.5 km) for a journey in the hilly terrain between Dewangiri and Poonakha, a distance of about 400 kms. In respect of this estimate, he observed, "[I]n so difficult a country, with heavily laden collies, [it] is as much as can be calculated upon with any certainty, at that season of the

[64] Griffith, Bhutan 1837-1838.


BHUTAN- ASSAM TRADE ROUTE
Kharchu La
Bod La
Me La
Tsona
Trimo
CHINA (Tibet)
Donkar
Manas R
Shskti
Tawang
Tashi Yangtsi
Tawang C
DongShima
Ghomkorah
Gamri C
Kuru R
Tashigang
3182
Tongsa
Rongtung
5175
Bamri C
Balphay
6804
Jiri C
Sasee
4325
Dirang
Dhansiri R
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
Khengumpa
7000
Bar R
Doimara
Rydong
1873
Diu R
Deothang
2150
Tezpur
Ghoorgong
Udalgiri
Manas R
Tezpur
Hazareegong
Dhamdhama
Bar R
Dhansiri R
Nalbari
Pagladiya R
Mongaldai
BHUTAN
Hajo
NOT TO SCALE
Brahmaputra R
Map 3
Source: Survey of India
INDEX
Boundary
Road
River (C/R)
Pass
Deothang 2150
Spot Height in Feet

year, in which the journey was effected."[65] The speed indeed fell drastically if the journey was conducted in rainy days.

Tashigang: The origin

Tashigang was the origin of the Bhutan-Assam trade route. It was an important place of Bhutan where Raja Chhogyal Minjur Tempa, the third Deb[66], built a three-storied *dzong* facing the river Manas in 1667 after extending his authority to eastern Bhutan[67]. As the *dzong* rendered protection to the people from wars and natural calamities, human settlements used to spring up densely in and around such *dzongs.* Tasgong's prosperity in the contemporary Bhutan also emerged out of such a development process. By the nineteenth century, it became a populous settlement with an extended hinterland all around. Because of this, and also since the *dzong* participated in the border trade[68], markets were developed there with supplies of both the Bhutanese and Tibetan commodities[69]. Tashigang, however, contributed a few commodities to those transactions. Although there were good arable lands in its surrounding villages, surplus production seldom occurred. Among the articles of export that were produced locally, stick-lac[70] was an important item. It was procured substantively from the valley of Tashigang. Tashigang was also famous for straight iron swords, known as *das* [71], three feet in length with spear and arrow head, which the neighbouring countries highly

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[65] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.40.
[66] The Deb Raja was the Prime Minister of Bhutan. He was the principal organ of the Government. Under his control there were four Governors or Pilo of four regions, Punakha, Paro, Wandipoor and Tongsa. See Baboo Kishen Kant Bose: Account of Bootan (1815), pp.342-346.
[67] Das, The Dragon Country, p.70.
[68] Boot, 'The Dzongs of Bhutan', p.99.
[69] An important market emerged below the Tashigang dzong. See Karan, Bhutan, p.64.
[70] White, Sikkim and Bhutan, p.190.
[71] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.75.

acclaimed for. Iron ores locally available in the hills at the northern foot of the castle were used for this purpose. These apart, *munjeet* and natural wax were collected from forests in its vicinities and *jubrung* (a spice) was procured from the north-east mountain for the purpose of export. But the majority of the products that went down the route came from Tibet.

In fact, Tashigang's importance as the origin was ensured by its road connections with Tibet, as adumbrated above. There were two paths between Tashigang and Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, through the valley of the river Manas (vide Map 4). One of them ran via Tawang[72]. In between Tashigang and Tawang there were two rivers, the Gamri-chu and the Tawang-chu, intercepted by a steep spur. A three-day march upstream the Tawang-chu led to the Bhutan-Tibet Border at Dong Shima where a bridge was available to cross the flowing river. From Tawang a road went to Tsona *dzong*, and thence to Lhasa. The bulk of the Tibetan trade was conveyed over this path to the plain. There was another path in between Tashigang and Lhasa. The northern hinterland of Tashigang was dotted with villages. From one such village, Tashi yangtsi, ran a road along the *Ging-la* to Lhasa via Donkar. According to White, the Ging-la path was 'an easy and good trade route'[73] which the Assam-bound Tibetan traders used extensively during the winter. The Tibetan merchants, however, brought with them coloured carpet (especially red), gold dust, rock salt, chowries, musk, Chinese silk, dye and bee-wax. The Bhutanese traders used to purchase woollen cloths, rock salts and ponies from Tibet for the Assam-bound trade.

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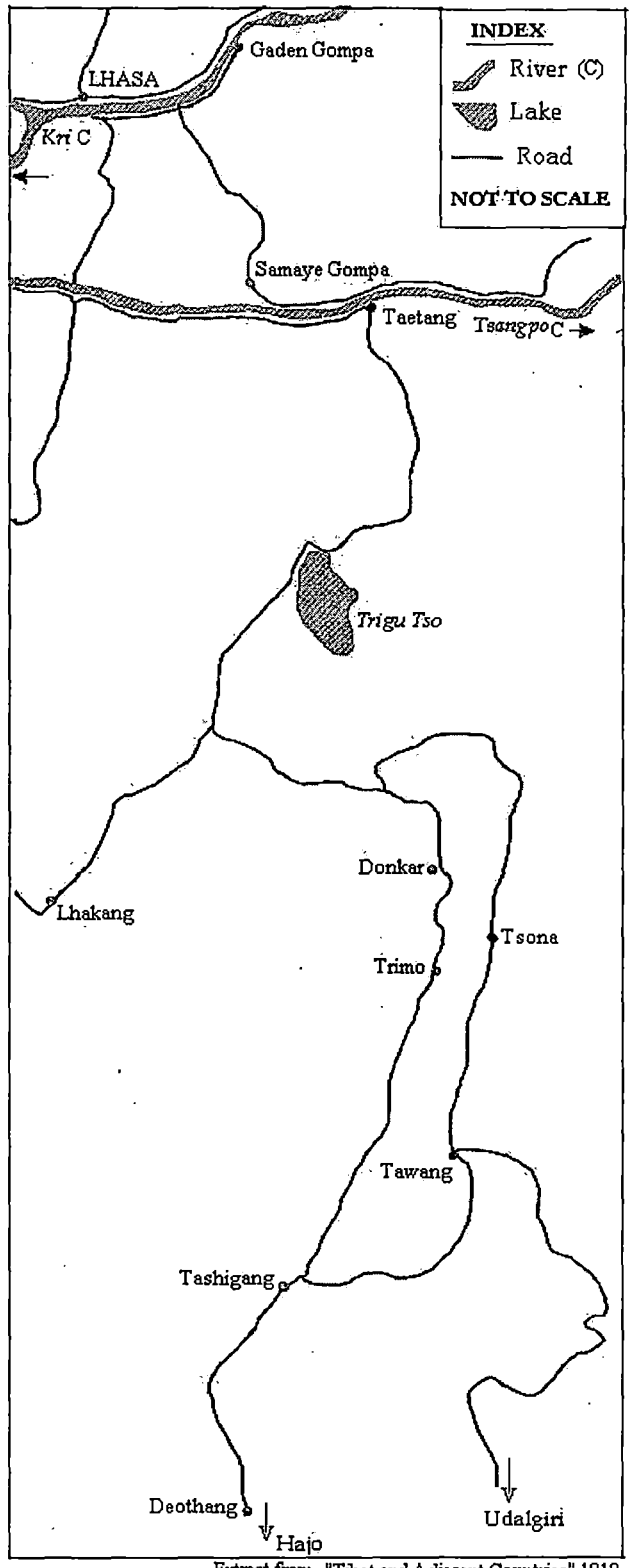
[72] ibid, p.78.
[73] White, Sikkim and Bhutan, p.194.

TASHIGANG - LHASA PATHS



Extract from: "Tibet and Adjacent Countries", 1919,
Centre for Himalayan Studies,
University of North Bengal, INDIA

Map 4

Some products were, however, added to the merchandise in the route. The products like walnuts, musk and *caoutchouc* (raw rubber) were available mainly in the lower ranges (below 3,000 feet above the sea level). Sometimes, the travelling traders added those to their merchandise from the places like Dewangiri;[74] but more often, local traders joined the caravans with those commodities.

Tibetan traders apart, merchants of many distant places used to visit this route when the communication between Bhutan and Assam was open through the jurisdiction of the Paro *Penlop*. The contemporary trade route[75] passed through Kashmir, Nepal, the Mooraug, Benaras, Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam, and this constituted the southern leg of the Silk Roads. It ensured as much as four times greater traffic in the Bhutan-Assam trade route than what plied during the nineteenth century. Both Bogle and Pemberton, however, noted that the trade had diminished in the wake of 'the jealousy of the Chinese administration' who sought to restrict the flow of British produce in her market. Pemberton observed, "[T]he suspicious and monopolising spirit of the Chinese Viceroy of Gortope is represented as almost effectually paralysing the operation of his own subjects, and excluding them from the advantages which would inevitably result from an unrestricted admission of British produce to the boundless regions of Tartary and Tibet."[76] The Paro *Penlop* also contributed to this decay by an attempt to monopolise this trade in exclusion of other merchants.

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[74] The place is presently called Deothang.
[75] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.80.
[76] ibid.

Hajo: The destination

The traders terminated their journey at Hajo in Assam. Located on the north bank of the Brahmaputra in the erstwhile Kamrup district, the place enjoyed perennial water transport facilities deep into the province of Bengal. Hill traders disposed their commodities in the Hajo market where the people congregated during the winter on the occasion of a religious fair at the Mahamuni temple. The temple attracted the Hindus and the Buddhists alike. The Hindus believed that a visit to this temple during this festival removed all the sins of their misdeeds. The people of the Brahminical faith, therefore, thronged on this occasion 'from all parts of India'. The Buddhists were equally zealous about this place on the faith that one of their great prophets and legislators was present there. William Robinson described, "The pious Buddhist too, imbued with the some faith, leaves his home in the distant regions of China and Thibet, and crossing the pathless tracts of the snowy Himalayas, burdened with the load of his offences, hastens to make obeisance at the shrine of his country's deity, and departs in joy and gladness, lightened of his load."[77]

As at the other ends of the country, the fair at Hajo had a predominant commercial character. The Bhutanese and the Tibetan traders sold off their commodities in this fair to the visiting pilgrims as well as traders. They were, however, less interested in Indian currency in exchange although the currency prevailed largely in Bhutan during the first half of the nineteenth century[78]. For making their return journey profitable, they procured the Assamese commodities as much as possible. Available information from three contemporary fairs shows that from the proceeds of their sales, the hill merchants

[77] Robinson, Descriptive Account of Asam, p.259.
[78] Rhodes, 'Coinage in Bhutan', pp.105-107.

retained only 35 percent in currency, and purchased the Assamese goods by the rest.[79] Staying for about three months at Hajo, these hill traders trekked back along the route in caravans.

Not that all hill traffic was terminated at Hajo. Though it attracted the lion's share, a few of them were diverted to other annual fairs at the base of the Bhutan hills. One such fair was held at Udalgiri in Darang district of Assam during February or March. Hunter described it as an important fair from the viewpoint of 'trade with the Bhutias, and other hill people living beyond the boundary [of Assam]'. He wrote, "It is attended by Bhutias, Tibetan, and Kamputis, as well as by the people of the plains from all the surrounding Districts, and a few Manipuris."[80] Similar fairs were also held at Kherkeria and at Doimara. Though these places belonged to the territory of Bhutan, a large number of people from Assam participated in those fairs giving rise to trade relation was ensured between Bhutan and Assam.

Nodes and links

Away from Tashigang the first resting place for the traders was Rongtung, around 10 km from the origin. It appears from the annexed map (vide Map 3) that the difference in altitude between these places was around 2,000 feet so that the journey was steep up the hills. Following the waves of the mountains, the connecting link assumed a zigzag direction. From Tashigang it descended gradually for a stretch of about three km along the course of the river Manas running around 1,000 feet above its bed. The road subsequently met the river Bamri, crossed it at its confluence with another torrent without

[79] See Table 3.1 above.
[80] Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, vol. 1, p.143.

any support of a bridge, and then became very steep upwards for a little long while. The steepness lessened only at the approach towards Rongtung. The roadsides were not, however, uniform all along. Till its stretch to the river Bamri, the wayside places were largely barren, vegetated only with coarse grasses, stunted shrubs and occasionally with long-leaf pines. A few villages sparsely occurred about the Bamri, and as the road reached nearby Rongtung, the terrace cultivation appeared in sight. Rongtung was basically an agrarian settlement where rice was cultivated in the summer, and barley or wheat during the winter. There was the Castle of Rongtung nearby a stream. Traders in this route took a night-rest here for further journey onwards.

The next leg of journey was from Rongtung to Balphay, a distance of around 10 km. The journey continued to be ascending as Balphay was 1,600 feet above Rongtung (vide Map 3). The link was very undulating in this area along the slope of the hills causing the journey hazardous. From Rongtung, the road inclined steeply, and only after crossing some depressions, it got a relatively plain stretch through the woods of oak. The woods were neither dense nor continuous, scattering rather here and there on the downs. Beyond those woods, a sharp inclination followed again, quite abruptly this time, leading the road to a height of 10,000 feet above the sea level. The journey was difficult as well as hazardous. It was particularly so at some places where the road ran along the edges of barren summits that were covered only with brown and low grasses. At the fag end of the journey, there was descent for about 2,000 feet. In its downward course, the road met a pagoda at a height of 8,000 feet above the sea level before finally entering Balphay from its north-east. The place, however, provided good accommodation. Most of the houses were well-built, covered with split bamboo and secured by rattans. Such precautions were

necessary in this place as violent winds blew here during the winter from the south and the south-east. Cultivation was not, however, very developed. The limited lands that were put into cultivation were meant primarily for turnips, radishes and barely. The quality of their yields showed that the soil and climate were not very suitable for agriculture.

From Balphay the journey proceeded to Sasee for about 18 km through a headlong fall from 6,804 feet above the sea level to 4,325 feet (vide Map 3). The connecting road from Balphay descended steeply for over 2,500 feet up to the river Jiri. This link was conspicuously narrow here, and ran through the decomposed flank of a mountain. An absence of mind might cause fatal to a traveller. Griffiths noted, "It was of such a nature that a slip of any sort would in many places [of the road] have precipitated one several hundred feet."[81] The road then ran downwards over the bed of the river Jiri for little more than a kilometre. This course was available only during the winter when the river became dry. Leaving the riverbed behind, the link took a turn for a continuous upsway excepting a down of 500 feet, and encountered again the river Jiri. Crossing the river finally led the road to Sasee. The place was not at all a prosperous settlement in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The houses were not as organised as one found in Balphay. Cultivation was also little undertaken, and was confined mainly to barley, buckwheat and hemp.

The next node on the route was Khengumpa, approximately 16 km away from Sasee. Given the difference of longitude between these nodes (vide Map 3), the link had to ascend by 2,700 feet. But the latter segment of the road was much steeper than this as its

[81] Griffiths, Journal of the Mission to Bootan in 1837-38, p.280.

former stretch was descending. Initially the road from Sasee went downwards up to the river Dimree. The river remained considerably wide even in winter but could be crossed along with the laden animals. There was another torrent a few kilometres away but it remained dry in winter. In between these rivers, the road ran undulating. But after crossing the torrent it became very steep upwards, and continued to be so till Khengumpa was reached. The journey on this link in caravan was difficult especially when it proceeded through the open ridges of spurs at the approach of Khengumpa. The roadsides were not, however, monotonous in vegetation. It varied from the Bapeel vegetation near Sasee through the humid and sub-tropical trees near Khengumpa. There were the woods of fir as well as the forest of oak resembling, according to Griffiths, 'much our well known English oak'[82]. Khengumpa was also a smaller settlement but agriculture was relatively developed. There were a number of valleys surrounding this node where cultivation flourished. There were also plantations of tobacco and Bobosa (*Clensine Coracana*) in gardens attached to the dwelling houses.

The journey then proceeded to Rydong. Around 18 km away from Khengumpa this settlement grew on the bottom of a rather narrow valley. Travelling traders used this node as the final halting place before reaching at the plain. The inhabitants took agriculture as the mainstay of their livelihood. A good deal of barley cultivation came to notice in this place during the winter. In contrast to the previous journey, however, travel from Khengumpa to Rydong was descending. It was from 7,000 feet above sea level to 1,900 feet. From the outskirts of Khengumpa the road was steep and rugged passing along the open ridges of the mountains or the narrow rock-corridors. During this journey the

[82] ibid, p.279.

mountain vegetation gradually disappeared and the looks of the plain came to notice as the road approached Rydong.

From Rydong the route went for about 11 km to reach Dewangiri. It was the last halting place in Bhutan. There was no human settlement on the waysides. The journey was easy as the road was inclined very gently, and also because of the bridge that was constructed on the river Diu. It was mandatory for the visiting traders to Assam that they should return back within a stipulated time. According to the custom of this border town, the local king allowed the traders to cross the border only when they left their brethren at the town as security. These temporary inhabitants constituted a large segment of population in this place during the trade season. Dewangiri was, however, a densely populated place. The people were mostly Bhutanese living in simple huts. A few stone-built houses were also there during the first half of the nineteenth century. Such houses were generally three-storied. The owners used to occupy the middle floor while the second floor was divided into several compartments for the purpose of rent. The ground floor was left for cooking. Water was, however, scarce as no stream or spring ran nearby. The local people brought water from distant places by aqueducts made of hollow trunks of small trees. Dewangiri had a special attraction for temple. There were a number of Buddhist temples where the travelling traders, by virtue of their faith, should visit for blessings. An extensive market was developed in this node for exchanging the hill products with the products of the plain. The people from Assam, especially the *Kacharees,* assembled in this market to trade on barter their own products like rice and dried fish for the *munjeet.*

The next halting place was Ghoorgong, around 13 km away from Dewangiri. The road descended steeply at its initial stretch, and boulders scattering on the way frequently obstructed the journey. Soon it met the Durunga, a river that remained dry in winter. Similar to the river Jiri, this river bed was used in winter by the caravans to march for a few kilometres. Along the river course they left the hills and entered Ghoorgong from its west. This first node in Assam was very close to the hills, and the intermediate gentle slope was covered with fine sward. There was hardly any cultivation in and around this place presumably because of unfriendly soils. The people perhaps lived on pasturing.

Leaving Ghoorgong the route advanced to Hazareegong. This was a 13-km journey. No land on the waysides was cultivated; nor was there any trace of villages. Only the woods of simool emerged occasionally in sight. The interception of river was also minimal. Only once the river Mutanga crossed the connecting road. Though this river remained wide and violent during the rainy season, it was almost without water during the winter so that the caravans could cross it without much inconvenience. Hazareegong was, however, predominated by the Bhutanese although it belonged to Assam. Agriculture could not flourish here, as the soils were less fertile. There was one resting-place at Hazareegong, locally called *wam-ghur*, where travellers took rest at night.

From Hazareegong the road went to Dhamdhama at a distance of about 15 km. The waysides were plain as before, and covered with dense reed and grass jungle. Only a few small and impoverished villages came on the way. This stretch of land earlier accommodated some large villages, but those were destroyed, as Pemberton noted, 'from

the effects of the hostile invasion by our troops under Captain Bogle in 1836'[83]. The connecting road bore a sign of negligence *albiet* its jurisdiction under the British governance. It got better maintenance only at the proximity of the mainland. A small but rapid stream, however, intercepted the road twice with a bed of pebbles. Fewer inconveniences were met to negotiate these interceptions. But difficulties cropped up to cross another river, the Noa Nuddee, at the fag end of the link. Because of its sandbank and quick sands, any venture on foot involved risks. Even in winter, the river flowed at a speed of around 5 kmph for a width of 70 yards. Elephants were usually employed here to ferry. On the bank of this river, Dhamdhama was situated. It was basically an agrarian settlement where people cultivated rice as the main crop, and the oilseeds and sugarcane to some extent.

From Dhamdhama the caravans advanced about16 km for the next halt at Nalbari. There was neither any river nor any long stretch of woods on the way. The waysides were dotted with villages, which, as Griffiths described, were concealed under the bamboo bushes from the views of the travellers. These villages also caught the notice of Pemberton. He noted, "All the fruit trees common to Bengal were found growing in profusion around the houses of the inhabitants; the herds of cattle were numerous and in the finest condition, and everything bespoke happiness and content."[84] Nalbari was, however, a busy commercial centre. A good number of migrant *Marwari* merchants settled here during the nineteenth century. These merchants owned several warehouses for long-distance trade, and dealt mainly with visiting traders.

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[83] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.39.
[84] ibid.

The 27-km journey in the last leg, i.e. from Nalbari to Hajo, ran amidst extensively cultivated fields and the clusters of village, much similar to the preceding roadsides. There were also a number of *jheels,* the big ponds, well stocked with waterfowl and waders. The otherwise easy journey on this plain was, however, circumvented by as many as four rivers, at least two of which threw challenges to cross.

3.4. Bhutan-Bengal trade route

The Bhutan-Bengal trade route claims antiquity on the strength of evidence from the seventeenth century foreign traveller Ralph Fitch. It came to further limelight and got the state patronage in Bengal during the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries because of the colonial government that looked after the trading interest of British goods in general and that of the English East India Company in particular. We have already discussed in chapter 2 that the route's importance to the British administration was due to their interest not in Bhutan *per se* but in Tibet and China as well that were accessible from Bhutan. We have also explained that the Bengal government supported the Bhutanese trade in Bengal in various ways.

There were eleven entry points, locally called *duars*, between erstwhile Bengal and Bhutan. Out of these, five *duars* belonged to the district of Jalpaiguri in Bengal and six to the district of Goalpara in Assam during the nineteenth century. The *duars* with Bengal were Lakhimpur, Kumargram, Balla, Chamurchi and Buxa. The caravans from Bhutan travelled mostly through the *duars* Kumargram, Chamurchi and Buxa because of the lack of penetrability at Lakhimpur and Balla. There was, however, a controversy regarding the popularity of Buxa vis-a-vis Chamurchi as a *duar* to Bhutan. Pemberton believed that traders disliked Buxa because of its steep, narrow and uneven paths, which

caused fatal even to pack animals. According to him, "It appears that the merchants who convey their goods from Tibet and Bootan to the town of Rungpoor in the plains, all travel from the northern frontier of the latter country through the districts subject to the Paro Pilo,...and instead of crossing, as was generally supposed, to the left bank of the Tchinchoo, near the confluence of that river with the Hatchoo, continue to travel along the right bank, by a route which leads to a village called Doona, between Dalimkotta and Cheemurchee. It is described, as infinitely more easy of access than the road by Buxa Dooar, ..."[85] Turner, however, did not agree with him. He believed that the journey of caravans that used the Buxa *duar* involved lower costs. Other authorities also confirmed the preference of the Buxa *duar* among travelling traders. The *duar* at Kumargram was, however, important because of its connection with Kalikhola, a big trade centre in Bhutan that was situated at a tri-junction between Bengal, Assam and Bhutan.

Although the Bhutan-Assam trade route was conspicuous by the absence of traders from the plain, Bengali traders frequently travelled in the Bhutan-Bengal route side by side the hilly traders like the Bhutanese and the Tibetans. George Bogle vouched this in a letter to the Governor-general of India in 1774[86]. A contemporary Bengali pilgrim also confirmed the presence of plain traders in this hilly route. He noted, "Many Bengal merchants had made their way through Bhutan to Tibet."[87] Moreover, available evidence confirms that traders from the plain were not discouraged by authorities either in Bhutan or in Tibet. According to a source, "Many merchants had ... brought their commodities to market ... The authorities were most heartily disposed to continue the

[85] Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.48.
[86] Markham, Narrative of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa, p.53.
[87] Quoted in Collister, Bhutan and the British, p.23.

commercial intercourse. There were no complaints of impediment or loss."[88] This was a significant development in the nineteenth century in view of the earlier attitude of the Deb Raja to exclude traders from the plain in this route.

Similar to other trade routes in this region, the Bhutan-Bengal route became active and vibrant only in the winter season. According to the Collector of Rangpur, "The Bootan caravans generally arrive at Rungpoor in February and March, and return to their country in May and June."[89] Note that monsoon arrived in the sub-Himalayan Bengal around early June so that the caravans from Bhutan scheduled their departure from this place prior to its onset.

The beasts of burden in this route had close similarity with those in the Bhutan-Assam trade route[90]. Cart was, however, never used here for transportation presumably because of its risk and inconvenience in an inclined road. Rather, the practice was to suspend goods on both sides of the animals through a connector of jute ropes, called *taat*. The people accompanying those beasts were called *bolodia*.[91]

From a contemporary source Pemberton prepared a list of Bhutan's import and export from Bengal. It appears from the list that the principal export items included *tangun*, *munjeet*, blankets, cow-tails, wax, musk, walnuts, lac, China silk, and silver. Tangun was by far the most significant item. An estimated number of 400-500 *tanguns* were annually sold in Bengal and fetched about Rs 30,000-40,000.[92] *Munjeet* came next

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[88] Gupta, British Relations with Bhutan, p.54.
[89] Quoted in Pemberton, Report on Bootan, p.77.
[90] Vide pp. 58-59.
[91] Barman, Uttar Banglar Sekal O Amar Jiban Smiriti, p.11.
[92] Firminger (ed.), Bengal District Records, Rangpur, vol. I, p.46.

in importance with its annual value of trade standing at Rs 7000.[93] It was extensively used in Bengal's cotton textile industry. Other important items were blankets and cow-tails amounting in value to Rs 2580 and Rs 550 per annum respectively.[94] Bhutan's import from Bengal included chiefly broadcloth, indigo, goat skins, and copper. There were also imports of endy cloth, coarse cloth, googol, sandal wood, country gun-powder, dried fish, tobacco, betel-nut, cloves, nutmegs, cardamom, nukher, camphor and sugar. It is noteworthy that Bhutan's trade balance with Rangpur ran deficit in most years with import exceeding export.

Paro: The origin

It was the origin of the Bhutan-Bengal trade route. Since we have already described the place in detail in Section 3.2 we avoid its repetition here. The destination of this route, and its nodes and links are discussed below.

Rangpur: The destination

Rangpur gained eminence as a destination of hill traffic on the strength of its transport linkage with important commercial towns and cities in the country. Its transportation was entirely river-borne. The river Tista on the bank of which the town was situated was linked with the Brahmaputra on the west and the Mahananda on the east. The Mahananda in turn flew into the Ganges. Rangpur was thus endowed with the transportation facilities of two great rivers of Eastern India, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Because of these linkages Rangpur emerged as a centre of exchange between the hill products coming from Bhutan and Tibet, on the one hand, and the products available in eastern India, on

[93] Martin, Eastern Bengal, vol. v, p.710.
[94] ibid, pp.710-711.

the other.

The principal commodities that the Bhutanese traders purchased from Rangpur were broadcloth and indigo. The imported English broadcloths in Calcutta were made available in plenty in Rangpur so that the hill markets in Bhutan and Tibet for English products could be explored from Rangpur. In fact, this was the business strategy of the East India Company, which they nurtured by posting their agents at Rangpur. The other product of significance, viz. indigo, was manufactured in Rangpur itself. About 13,000 acres of land were annually put into cultivation in this district during the mid-nineteenth century.[95] While the big manufacturers sent their output directly to Calcutta, the smaller ones sold their products to the local user-industry and the Bhutanese traders. The Bhutanese demand for this commodity may be assessed from the fact that when the Rangpur fair was discontinued in 1832, about 1000 maunds of indigo were to be brought from Rangpur to Jalpaiguri mainly for sale to Bhutanese traders.[96]

The exchange of goods from the hills took place in fairs that sprang up at different places in this region. Those fairs were generally held in winter and continued roughly for four weeks. The biggest one took place at Darwani where, according to a contemporary source, around 50,000 visitors participated. In addition to the traditional products, various live animals like elephants, camel, sheep etc were sold here from the neighbouring states like Bihar. Similar fairs were also held at Panga, Barabhita, Badarganj, Birat and Rangpur. The Rangpur fair was, however, sponsored by the government, who provided the entire organisational expenditures. Bogle started this fair in 1780. There were no state

[95] Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal, p.246.
[96] ibid.

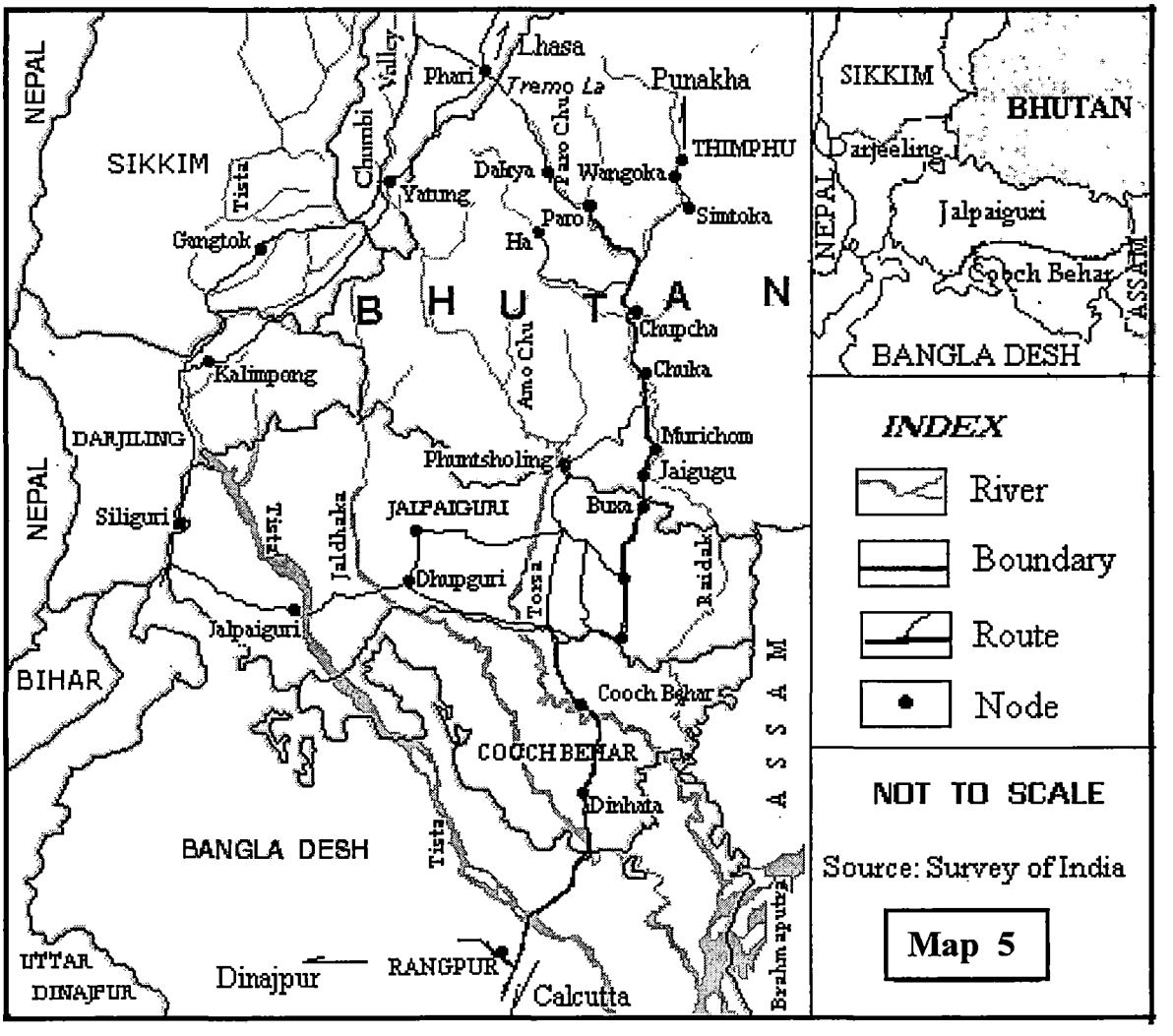
interventions or intervention of any local bodies in the affairs of these fairs. Bhutanese merchants were, as Bogle remarked in 1780, 'left to the freedom of their own will in buying and selling, [and] went away very well satisfied.'[97]

Nodes and links

From Paro Bengal-bound caravans descended along the banks of the river Pa-chu in the south-east direction, and took a halt 16 km away at Paku, which was situated at the confluence of the Pa-chu and Ma-chu. On the wayside valley of the river grew a few prosperous villages where inhabitants were mostly arm-guards and officials of the Paro fort.[98] Sometimes, the caravans halted at the village Essana, close to Paku, which was basically an agrarian settlement. Paku had its importance in the contemporary business network because of its road linkage, in addition to the present one, with Tassisudon (presently called Thimpu), the capital of Bhutan (vide Map 5). From Paku, however, the caravans changed their direction, and proceeded southward towards the border of Bengal.

[97] Quoted in Deb, Bhutan and India, p.cliii.
[98] Eden, Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64, p.91.

BENGAL-BHUTAN TRADE ROUTE



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The first place of commercial interest in this route was Buxa, a place on the Cooch Begar-Bhutan border around 110 km from Paku. In between Paku and Buxa there were several villages where caravans might halt at night. More prominent among such villages were Chupcha, Chukha, Murichom and Jaigugu (vide Map 5) with successive distances at 27 km, 28 km, 20 km and 19 km. Travelling traders preferred Chupcha and Chukha for the existence of castles there where they felt safe at night. Murichom and

Jaigugu were, however, prosperous agricultural settlements, and traders could rest there at night along with their pack animals. The road in this stretch ran through the slopes of mountains and narrow valleys along the river-bed. Some mountains were almost barren while others were cultivated on the *jhum* technology. The importance of this stretch of the route is understood from the existence of an iron suspension bridge over the river Teemboo in between Chukha and Murichom. It was 147 ft in length and 6 ft in breadth, and could be raised vertically up to about seven feet.

Every caravan, however, took a halt at the commercial hubs of Buxa. It was situated at the base of several mountains, and spacious enough to accommodate a great body of human settlement. Turner described it as 'a place of great natural strength'. He continued, "[B]eing a frontier station of these mountains, [it] has been rendered still stronger by the aid of art, which has been most ingeniously employed to strike off the summit of the hill, and to level an extensive space, capable of affording accommodation to a body of men, sufficiently numerous for the defence of this difficult pass, against all assult".[99] Because of the importance of this place as the entry point of their trading world, Bhutanese traders performed various rituals at Buxa. One such ritual was to cut off the tails of their horses. Obviously, it disfigured the appearance of *tangans*, and accordingly, depreciated their market value. The British government in Bengal, however, persuaded them to abolish the custom by providing liberal rewards. There was a hearsay that for this liberal reward of the government the place was referred as the 'bounteous pass' or the Buxa *duar*.[100]

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[99] Turner, An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet, pp. 39-40.
[100] ibid, p.40.

The next important commercial town in this route was Cooch Behar, around 48 km away from Buxa. Unable to cover up this distance in a day, the caravans used to take brakes at Minagoung and Chichakotta villages that stood on the way between Buxa and Cooch Behar. While Chichakotta housed a fort that attracted the travellers to stay at night, Minagoung was preferred as a halting place by the Bhutanese caravans as well as Buxa-bound traders from the plain. In this stretch from Buxa to Cooch Behar, however, the hilly terrain got flatter and plain. The slope declined so gently that, as Griffith described, 'the boundaries of the Hills and those of the Plains were but ill-defined'[101]. Consequently, the journey in this segment was smooth and comfortable in contrast to the hazards of the previous legs. The connecting road sometimes ran through the heart of dense foothill forests, sometimes over grass land, and occasionally by the side of wild pineapple orchards. In the season, pineapples were available here in plenty, and Turner reported that 'no less than twenty may be bought for a rupee, about the value of half a crown'[102].

Many traders from Bhutan terminated their journey at Cooch Behar disposing their wares. It was a commercial centre that developed from the sixteenth century onwards as a centre of exchange among various traders from Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim and India. In addition to various agricultural products that grew in and around Cooch Behar, several merchandises also came from Patna, Rajmahal and Gaur[103] for sale to the Bhutanese traders. Hunter noted, "The Bhutia trade with Bengal was carried on formerly, as now, through territory occupied by Koch chiefs; and when a party of Bhutias arrived in

[101] Griffiths, Journal of the Missions to Bootan in 1837-38, p.302.
[102] Turner, An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet, pp. 13-14.
[103] Deb, Bhutan and India, p.55.

Kuch Behar, it was customary that they should be maintained at public expense".[104] This explains the importance of Bhutanese traders in the commerce of Cooch Behar.

The last leg of journey was from Cooch Behar to Rangpur, and that covered a distance of approximately 82 km. Since this was an extensive human settlement, the caravans did not find any difficulty to find out their places of rest at night. Often did they stay at places like Ghiddildow, Pahargange, Badaldanga, Mangalhaut, Saftabarry and Calamatty. Most of these were agrarian villages. Only Mangalhaut was a large manufacturing town that stood at the border of Rangpur and Cooch behar. Excepting innumerable rivers that the caravans were to cross, there was no hazard in this journey.

3.5. Conclusion

Trade routes of Bhutan with Tibet, Assam and Bengal that this chapter elaborates were thus very active during the nineteenth century. The Bhutan-Tibet trade route that ran about 410 km from Paro to Lhasa belonged largely to the territory of Tibet with Bhutan accounting for only one eighth part of this stretch and three links out of 26. It was thoroughly a mountain route posing various hazards and threats to travelling traders. That was why the speed of caravans here was as low as less than 16 km a day on the average. There were, however, three other contemporary trade routes between Bhutan and Tibet, which originated from different places of Bhutan but were all destined to Lhasa. All these trade routes treaded through mountain passes and river valleys. The route we have studied contained four such passes, viz. Tremo, Tang, Kharo and Kampa.

The Bhutan-Assam trade route ran around 170 km from Tashigang to Hajo with its intermediate stretch distributed almost equally between the hills and the plain. The route

[104] Hunter, Statistical Account of the State of Kuch Behar, pp.412-413.

consisted of eleven links out of which six belonged to the hill terrain and five in the plain. Journey on the mountain links was tedious, and involved a good amount of risk. Obstacles in the plain were, however, created by the rivers which did not go dry even in winter. Most of the rivers in the hills, however, remained dry in winter so that the travellers walked over their beds in caravans. There were two paths connecting Tibet with this route through the valley of the Manas. Those were: a) a path via Tashigang and b) a path via Donkar through the Ging la.

In contrast to the Bhutan-Tibet or the Bhutan-Assam trade routes, the Bhutan-Bengal trade route belonged mostly to the plain. Only a part of its 268-km long stretch from Paro to Rangpur had alternating inclinations of hilly terrain. Gently climbing down from the mountain, it passed amidst century-old human settlements in the plain. Expectedly, the average speed of caravans in this route was on a higher side, viz. about 21 km per day as against 14.5 km per day in the Bhutan-Assam route, and 16 km a day in the Bhutan-Tibet route.

Caravans used to ply on these routes only during the winter because of favourable climate and also to take advantage of dry river courses. Pack animals that were used were mules, ponies, yaks, sheep etc. In hilly terrains, yaks, ponies and mules were extensively employed because of their great strength. Choice of pack animals, however, varied according to the nationality of caravans. These were definite preference to horses in the Tibetan caravans, ponies in the Bhutanese caravans to Bengal, and sheep among the nomads. Human beings were also employed for transportation of goods in the Bhutanese caravans. There were also variations across these trade routes.

Bhutan's export list included rice, woolen cloths, *munjeet* and certain imported products from Bengal in the Bhutan-Tibet route, ponies, rock salt, blankets, spices and gold in the Bhutan-Assam route, and *tangun*, *munjeet*, blankets, cow-tails, wax, musk, walnuts, lac and certain Chinese products in the Bhutan-Bengal route. Imports through these respective routes were raw wool, musk, tea, silver, gold, rock salt and silk goods; paddy, rice, silk cloth and cotton cloths; and broad cloth, indigo, goat skins and copper. A number of imported items such as gold, silver, rock salt, musk etc. were meant for re-export indicating the transit nature of the Bhutanese trade. The nature of the commodities traded in these routes indicates that they gave rise to trans-ecological exchanges in conformity with the hypothesis of Curtin.