

Sikkim's Trade with Tibet and Bengal During the British Period

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Sikkim initially developed her trade relations with Tibet with whom she had closer ties than with any other neighbouring country. But gradually as Sikkim came in grater contact with British India her trade with the latter increased. There seems to have been little trade between Sikkim and Bhutan, because apart from geographical barriers the two countries were similar in their economic pattern and as such one could provide very little of what the other required. There might have been some border trade between the two countries but not worth mentioning. Trade with Nepal was also insignificant due to the insurmountable Singalila range which formed the boundary between Sikkim and Nepal. Even today Sikkim's trade with these two countries negligible.

A. TRADE WITH TIBET

Let us first discuss Sikkim's trade with Tibet. The earliest British records on trade with Tibet are to be found in the reports of the Bogle Mission¹ of 1774 and the Turner Mission² of 1783. But these were less concerned with Sikkimese-Tibetan trade than with Anglo-Tibetan trade to which we shall refer later on.

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1. C. Markham, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet, and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa* (London: 1878)
2. S. Turner, *Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Tashi Lama in Tibet, 1783* (London: 1800)

The nature of Sikkim's trade with Tibet during the later part of the 19th century can be gauged from the account of Edgar who visited Sikkim and the Tibetan frontier in 1873 for exploring the possibilities of Anglo-Tibetan trade across Sikkim. Edgar describes:

"While we were at the Pass, a man from Gungtuck, with his wife, came up with murwa of their own growing to the the value of about six rupees, which they were taking to Choombi for sale. They said that they meant to take the proceeds to Phari, where they could buy salt, which they would bring in to Darjeeling, where they might probably lay out the proceeds of its sale in an investment for the Tibet market, if they found time to do so before next year's sowing season. I mention this case, as it is a typical one. There was scarce a day during my stay in East Sikkim that I did not meet people either coming from, or on their way to, Darjeeling with goods, the value of which at first sight seemed quite disproportioned to the labour that had to be underdone in taking them to market; but I have no doubt they find the traffic pays them. These marwa-sellers expected to get six rupees for their morwa at Choombi, and with this sum to be able to buy at Phari four maunds of salt, which they could sell in Darjeeling for Rs. 23, while the value of their murwa at Guntuck was only Rs. 4 - 8".³

Report on the Administration of Bengal for the year 1874-75 gives a list of items that were exported to or imported from Tibet by Sikkim. The items of export were mainly millet, rice, oranges and madder. The items of import were mainly ponies, blankets, salt, jewellery, yak's tails, China caps, musk silk, tea and sheep.⁴ It is obvious from the above lists that while Sikkim exported only a limited number of articles, she imported a good variety of goods. This suggests that Sikkim had an adverse balance of trade with Tibet.

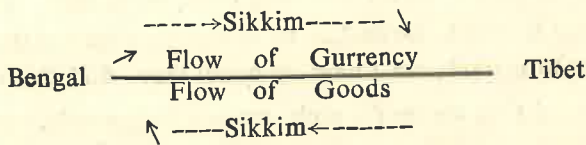
In the above report it has also been stated that Tibet earned British rupees by selling their cattle, salt and other produce in Assam and Nepal. In the absence of any statistics on Sikkim-Tibet trade it cannot be ascertained definitely whether Tibet had a net earning for Sikkim. Most probably Sikkim also had an adverse balance of trade as Assam and Nepal had with Tibet.

The suggestion that Sikkim had an adverse balance of trade with Tibet is strengthe-

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3. J.W. Edgar, *Report on a Visit to Sikkim and the Tibetan Frontier in October, November and December, 1873* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1874), p. 32.
 4. Government of Bengal, *Report on the Administration of Bengal for the year 1874-75* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press), p. 27.

ned by the fact that during the entire period (excepting four years) for which data are available (from 1876-77 to 1922-23) Sikkim had a favourable balance of trade with Bengal, the only other country with which she had substantial trade.* As British £ was the international currency, the deficit in the Tibet trade was presumably bridged by the surplus in the Bengal trade.

A point to note in the description of Edgar is that the traders carried on their trade with Tibet and Bengal simultaneously. In fact, they were of the traders between Tibet and Bengal-Sikkim being only the route. This also suggests that the two traders were complementary in nature—the deficit in one being filled up by the surplus in another. The cycle of trade between the three countries can be depicted in the following diagram:



Coming to the 20th century we find a similar trade pattern. Morris says that until 1918 most of the Lepchas in the Zongu area used to take forest dyes to Lachen in north Sikkim and then exchange them for Tibetan salt for their own use, but the bulk of it was taken to Darjeeling where they exchanged it for raw cotton which their women spun into cloth. This trade was, however, ultimately taken over by the money lenders and traders from India who steadily wormed their way into Sikkim and ousted the local traders.

Morris also says that before the Indian money-lenders arrived, most of the Zongu people had a number of "ingzongs" which were some sort of bloodbrothers. This fraternal relationship obviated the need for borrowing for trading purposes. Afterwards, with the presence of Indian money-lenders and the absence of trade among the local people, the institution lost its significance. Some people, however, had their ingzongs in 1930s but it was now only a means of cementing a close friendship.⁵

Although the Lepchas gave way to the Indian traders the Bhutias continued their trade in traditional way. Some of the erstwhile Bhutia traders were, however, employed by their

* See Later

5. C.J. Morris, *Living with the Lepchas: A Book about the Sikkim Himalays* (London: Willing Heinemann, 1938), p. 278.

Indian counterparts as "carriers of goods" thereby practically being converted into wage-earners. As has already been stated, the Bhutias used to migrate to the Tibetan plateau during summer each year with their flocks of grazing animals: and in course of their journey to and from Tibet they carried on trade as a complementary profession. They carried manufactured articles from the plains of India to Tibet and during their return journey brought articles like salt, dried meat, wool, butter and other foodstuffs. In this trade ponies, and to some extent yaks, were used for transportation.⁶

But the Bhutia trade has stopped now. After the Sino-Indian border dispute in 1962 the Sikkim-Tibet border was sealed and the Bhutias have since been forced to seek alternative occupations.

B TRADE WITH BENGAL

Coming to trade between Sikkim and Bengal we see that prior to the arrival of the British it was quite negligible. The British were not, however, so much keen on developing trade with Sikkim as with Tibet, but in their attempt to foster the latter the former also developed.

In 1774 the Bogle Mission was sent to Tibet for investigating the prospect of an Anglo-Tibetan trade. In 1783 another mission under Turner was sent for similar purposes. In Bogle's report we find that the principal exports of Tibet to Bengal at that time were gold dust, musk and cow-tails; while the imports were broadcloth, otter skins, indigo, pearls, coral, amber couch shells, spices, tobacco, sugar, Malva striped satins and a few white coarse cloths.⁷ In Turner's report we find tincal as an additional export item. The additional import items were snuff boxes, smelling bottles, knives, scissors spectacles, cloves, nutmegs, sandal wood emeralds, sapphires, lapis lazuli, jet, cottons and leather.⁸ In those accounts Sikkim was deemed as part of Tibet and as such the above descriptions may be taken as partially representative of Sikkim's trade with Bengal.

A landmark in the development of trade between Sikkim and the British territories was the conclusion of the Anglo-Sikkimese treaty of 1861 whereby free trade was established

6. S. Bose, "The Bhot of Northern Sikkim", *Man in India*, 46, No. 2 (April-June, 1966), 169.

7. Markham, pp. 124-9.

8. Turner pp. 381-4.

between the two countries. The relevant portions of the treaty⁹ may be mentioned in this connection :

“The Government of Sikkim from this date abolishes all restrictions on travellers and monopolies in trade between the British territories and Sikkim. There shall henceforth be a free reciprocal intercourse, and full liberty of commerce between the subjects of both countries; it shall be lawful for British subjects to go into any part of Sikkim for the purpose of travel or trade, and the subjects of all countries shall be permitted to reside in and pass through Sikkim, and to expose their goods for sale at any place and in any manner that may best suit their purpose, without any interference whatever, except as is hereinafter provided”. [Article 8]

“No duties or fees of any sort shall be demanded by the Sikkim, Government of any person or persons on account of goods exported into the British territories from Sikkim, or imported into Sikkim from the British territories.” [Article 10]

Detailed statistics on trade between Sikkim and Bengal are available for the period between 1876-77 to 1922-23 after which no such statistics were maintained. We may refer to the trade pattern in two select years during this period as specimen. In the year 1876-77 the following were the main items of trade ;

Table 1

Sikkim's Trade With Bengal, 1876-77

Main Exports To Bengal	Rs.	Main Imports From Bengal	Rs.
1. Timber.....	7,08,708	1. Indigo	66,000
2. Cattle	19,710	2. Cattle	23,220
3. Miscellaneous Rain Crop.....	14,457	3. Brass and Copper.....	14,520

Source : *Report on the Internal Trade of Bengal for the Year 1876-77*, p. 270.

9. V. H. Coelho, *Sikkim and Bhutan* (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1971), pp. 105-9,

Coming to 1889-90 when the first Political Officer of Sikkim was appointed and the British hold in the country firmly established, we find a variety of items in the export-import list:

Table 2

Sikkim's Trade with Bengal, 1889-90

Main Exports To Bengal	Rs.	Main Imports From Bengal	Rs.
1. Rain Crops	45,859	1. Cotton Piece Goods	33,775
2. Brass & Copper	14,500	2. Husked Rice	13,477
3. Gram & Pulse	13,417	3. Tobacco	7,271
4. Vegetable Oil	9,650	4. Intoxicating Drugs	6,480
5. Fruits & Vegetables	9,519	5. Provisions	6,301
6. Silver	4,300	6. Cattle	5,194
7. Cattle	2,721	7. Salt	4,799
8. Hides of Cattle	2,509	8. Fruits & Vegetables	2,888
9. Spices	2,489	9. Brass & Copper	2,470

Sources : *Report on Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan: 1889-89.*

From the above lists it is clear that Sikkim's exports during the late 19th century were mainly the products of forestry, agriculture and minerals. On the other hand, she imported mainly industrial products like cotton piece-goods and agricultural products that could not be produced in Sikkim. Some items like brass and copper, fruits and vegetables, and cattle appeared in both the export and import sides of the trade.

But as the 20th century approached, some changes in the export-import pattern were observable. These were mainly due to Tibet's trade with Bengal which passed through Sikkim. For example minerals like brass and copper which were yet to be discovered in Sikkim were initially used to be imported from Bengal (as in 1876-77) but later on they were exported to Bengal although a small amount still continued to be imported (as in 1889-90). This change in trade pattern was not due to the discovery and exploration of these minerals in Sikkim, but to the fact that in the later years Sikkim began to import these minerals from Tibet and then export them to Bengal.

Similarly, in 1895-96 Sikkim exported yak tails worth Rs. 3,000 to Bengal. Most probably these also has been imported from Tibet which was famous for yak tails.¹⁰ In fact, this situation prevailed even during the 1920's as the *Administration Report of the Sikkim State for 1922-23* says, "the greater portion of Sikkim's exports to Bengal were really the "re-export of livestock and raw wool imported from Tibet."¹¹

Another change in the trade pattern was that initially (as in 1889-90) Sikkim imported a large amount of foodgrains, especially husked rice, from Bengal. But in the early years of the 20th century there was a scarcity of foodgrains in Bengal which led to large-scale export of foodgrains from Sikkim.¹²

The development of Sikkim's trade with Bengal during the period of 47 years which data are available can be seen from the following table :

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10. Government of India, *Report on Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan: 1889-90* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot), p. 13.
 11. *Ibid.*, p 17.
 12. Government of Sikkim, *Administration Report of the Sikkim State for 1918-19* (Calcutta: Bengal Government Press), p. 9.
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Table 3

Years	Sikkim's Exports to Bengal. Rs.	Sikkim's Imports from Bengal. Rs.	Remarks
1876-77	8,02,657	1,41,647	
1877-78	18,222	16,589	
1878-79	1,20,841	60,184	
1879-80	2,51,491	48,085	
1880-81	1,67,960	80,898	Probably Includes Tibetan Trade.
1881-82	1,67,533	86,011	
1882-83	2,00,148	1,16,294	
1883-84	2,21,523	1,12,711	
1884-85	3,75,987	2,04,735	
1885-86	75,855	78,641	Deficit Balance.
1886-87	52,497	40,071	
1887-88	1,74,835	76,035	
1888-89	1,24,636	75,723	
1889-90	1,17,847	1,10,070	
1890-91	1,50,580	1,23,226	
1891-92	2,20,157	1,26,989	
1892-93	2,43,591	1,80,919	
1893-94	2,83,111	2,07,068	
1894-95	4,18,879	3,06,006	
1895-96	4,66,555*	4,33,856	*Rs. 5,03,681 according to Re- port for 1897-98.
1896-97	7,55,906	4,17,902	
1897-98	4,94,039	3,64,963	
1898-99	5,68,642	4,22,976	
1899-1900	5,69,623	3,86,988	

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1900-01	4,21,579	2,55,546	
1901-02	5,06,386	3,19,707	
1902-03	3,43,396	2,73,716	
1903-04	3,09,872	3,10,770	Deficit Balance.
1904-05	2,35,108	3,61,144	„ „
1905-06	4,07,725	4,74,691	„ „
1906-07	6,78,813	5,24,798	
1907-08	8,23,822	7,97,562	
1908-09	9,29,263	7,62,232	
1909-10	9,30,351	9,24,443	
1910-11	9,83,498	8,06,623	
1911-12	11,96,679	10,89,656	
1912-13	15,07,327	83,67,441	
1913-14	30,89,466	16,00,530	
1914-15	28,56,427	15,76,151	
1915-16	26,79,635	16,28,425	
1916-17	27,22,685	16,73,013	
1917-18	28,67,677	11,24,341	
1918-19	32,74,747	12,60,044	
1919-20	51,34,716	16,66,543	
1920-21	56,22,560	15,26,605	
1921-22	68,59,420	13,29,878	
1922-23	69,35,711	15,51,532	

- Sources :
1. *Report on the Internal Trade of Bengal, 1876-77 and 1877-78* (for those years).
 2. *Report on Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan: 1880-81 to 1912-13* (for the years 1878-79 to 1912-13).
 3. *The Frontier Trade of Bengal: 1913-14 to 1920-21* (for those years).
 4. *The Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan in 1921-22* (for that year).
 5. *Administration Report of the Sikkim State for 1922-23* p. 17 (for that year).

Some sources say that the trade figures for the year 1876-77 to 1884-85 were related to Sikkim and Tibet combined, and those for 1885-86 and onwards were related to Sikkim proper.¹³ We see from the above table that there was a sharp fall in exports from Rs. 3,75,987 in 1884-85 to Rs. 75,855 in 1885-86. During the corresponding years imports also fell from Rs. 2,04,735 to Rs. 78,641. Assuming the two years as normal, this fall is explained by the exclusion of Tibet trade in the figures for 1885-86.

From the above table we see that during the late years of the 19th century, both exports to, and imports from, Bengal rose appreciably. But excepting 1885-86 there was always a surplus balance of trade. Taking 1885-86 as the base year as the statistics for the earlier years probably included Tibetan trade, it is seen that by the end of the century exports increased 7.5 times and imports 5 times.

During the early 20th century also both exports and imports continued to increase. As before there was always (excepting 1903-04, 1904-05 and 1905-06) a surplus balance of trade and it went on increasing year after year. Thus in the recorded years of the 20th century exports rose 16 times while in the same period imports rose only 6 times. This means that as time passed on Sikkim earned more and more export surplus from her trade with Bengal. In fact, excepting 4 years in the whole period of 47 years there was a rising trend in export surplus. This corroborates our earlier hypothesis that Sikkim had a deficit balance of trade with Tibet which she paid up out of her earnings from Bengal.

As we have seen earlier, British power was attracted to Sikkim and established itself there to keep open the most direct trade route to Lhasa which led ultimately to Peking. The prime function of the British Political Officer, until the eclipse of British power in the Indian subcontinent, was to guard the trade officials at Yatung, Gyantse and Lhasa and keep communications alive.¹⁴ The provision of free trade between Sikkim and the British territories in the treaty of 1861 had, in fact, been made in order to ensure free flow of trade between Tibet and the British territories.

After the departure of the British this relation of free trade, however, still continued and it was later incorporated in the treaty of 1950 between Sikkim and India.¹⁵ The motive was now solely the mutual benefit for the signatory countries—and not the promotion of trans-Himalayan trade. Since 1975 when Sikkim became a constituent state of the Indian Union the question of ensuring free trade with India has naturally become irrelevant.

13. Government of Bengal, *Report on the Internal Trade of Bengal 1877-78*

14. Coelho, p. 50.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-17.