

## Reconstructing Nineteenth Century Trade Route between Bhutan and Assam: Evidences from British Political Missions<sup>\*</sup>

*Indrajit Ray<sup>\*\*</sup> and Ratna Sarkar<sup>\*\*\*</sup>*

Recent studies contradict a longheld western perception that Bhutan was a landlocked and isolated kingdom until the recent times without any significant trade relation with the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> They have dug the contemporary documents to prove her vibrant trade with the neighbours at least from the seventeenth century onwards. Side by side with the present jurisdiction of West Bengal, the kingdom carried out trade with Assam in those days. The extent of her historical interconnection with Assam is understood from the evidence of seven duars (doors)<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 article seeks to identify that trade route, and to analyse its various facets. The route has not yet been studied in any detail presumably because of inadequate source materials. We seek to reconstruct it based on the data and information from the reports of two British political

<sup>\*</sup> We acknowledge Dr. D.P. Boot, Cartographer, Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University for the preparation of maps in this study, and also for his valuable comments. All errors, however, remain with the authors.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Reader, Department of Commerce, University of North Bengal, India

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Senior Research Fellow (UGC), Department of Commerce, University of North Bengal, India

---

jurisdiction of Tawang Rajah. For details of these duars see William Robinson's *Descriptive Account of Assam: with a Sketch of the Tea-Plant of Assam*, p. 348, p. 294.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the forest of one such duar Kishen Kant Bose noted, from Bijni to Wandipore in Bhutan through very high jungle to the extent '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 innumerable mosquitoes and other insects with which it is filled'. See Kuloy, H. K. ed., *Political Missions to Bootan, Baboo Kishen Kant Bose's Account of Bootan*. (1815), p.355. For the details of antisocial elements. See John M'Cosh's *Topography of Assam*, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> William Griffith, *Bhutan 1837-1838*.

<sup>5</sup> R.Boileu Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*.

<sup>6</sup> T.Matthew Ciolek, *Digitising Data on Eurasian Trade Routes: an experimental notation system*  
<http://www.ciolek.com/PAPERS/pnc-berkeley-02.html>, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> J.P.Drege and E.M.Buhrer, *The silk road Saga, Facts on File*. NewYork, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Morris Rossabi, 'The silk roads: An educational Resource', *Education About Asia*, Vol.4, 1999, pp.16-20.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, L.Boulnois, *The silk road*, trans. D.Chamberlain, 1966; I.M.Franck and D.M.Brownstone, *The silk road: A history, Facts on File*.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Hopkrik, *Foreign devils on the silk road: The search for the lost treasure of central Asia*.

<sup>11</sup> Franck and Brownstone, *The silk road*, pp.30-32.

<sup>12</sup> P.D.Curtain, *Cross cultural trade in world history*, p.16.