



TIBETAN TRADE AND TRADING COMMUNITY IN DARJEELING

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ABSTRACT

Darjeeling had long history with Tibet. One of the important histories is commercial interaction and migration of Tibetan merchants in this District. Since its emergence as hill station the Tibetans started business and after the annexation of Tibet by the Chinese Government their number increased radically. As a result the business vista of this hill town changed dramatically. In this present article an attempt has been taken to sketch the commercial dynamics of the Tibetans and its impact on Darjeeling.



KEYWORDS: *Tibetan trader, commerce, import-export, etc.*

INTRODUCTION

Relationship between Tibet and Darjeeling is traced back before the arrival of the British in Darjeeling. Geographically and historically, by race, religion and language, Bhutan, Sikkim and the district of Darjeeling are very similar to Tibet, though politically they are now distinct. Tibetans Bhutias-a people of Tibetan origin are there, particularly in Sikkim and Darjeeling even though in course of time they were greatly outnumbered by immigrants from Nepal¹. The name Darjeeling itself is said to have been derived from the Tibetan words 'dorje' meaning thunderbolt (originally the scepter of Indra) and 'linga' a place or land, hence 'the land of the thunderbolt'. The Presence of the Tibetan mercantile group in Darjeeling was a natural historical fact.

After the annexation of Darjeeling in 1835 from the Sukkimputty by the British, it soon emerged as a sanatorium, plantation hub, tourist destination and trade mart within a few decades in nineteenth century. As a result hundreds and thousands people from neighbouring states attracted by the development. Soon it became populated. Likewise a number of Tibetans migrated to Darjeeling for better livelihood and the British authorities in India also renewed their interest in Tibet in the late 19th century. A number of Indians and British made their way into Tibet, first as explorers and then as traders. It was not easy because Tibet was still a 'Forbidden' country and not at all opened to the idea of entertaining foreigners, particularly the Christian British on its jurisdiction. The British authority in India made futile attempts to open Tibet. Hence, treaties regarding Tibet were concluded between Britain and China in 1886, 1890, and 1893, but the Tibetan government refused to recognize their legitimacy and continued to bar British envoys from its territory. From 1860 onwards commercial interests in Tibet were diverted from Western Tibet to the road to Lhasa through Sikkim. It was the shortest route between Calcutta and Lhasa with Darjeeling as an entrepot for Central Asian trade. During "The Great Game", a period of rivalry between Russia and Britain, the British desired a representative in Lhasa to monitor and offset Russian influence. In 1904-5 the Young Husband Mission became the first 'successful' mission to get some commercial facilities from the Tibetan authority.

The physical geography and climate of Tibet are not suitable for extensive cultivation. The Tibetan economy is dominated by subsistence agriculture. Due to limited arable land, the primary occupation in the Tibetan Plateau is raising livestock, such as sheep, cattle, goats, camels, yaks, and horses. The main crops grown are barley, wheat, buckwheat, rye, potatoes, and assorted fruits and vegetables. Trading is also taken as an important livelihood. They are endowed with trading instinct. It is said that "Tibetan is a born trader"². They journeyed for long caravan. Many early British records described both the good commercial intercourse between Darjeeling and Tibet and the existence of the Tibetan businessmen in the Sadar. In 1873 J.W Edgar, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling reported that he met some Tibetan traders who were on their way to Darjeeling where they wanted to exchange coarse blanket for tobacco. It is discussed later. In 1880s R.D O'Brien also described that "Tibetan may often be seen in Darjeeling during the cold weather, short description of them may be of interest. In a mixed crowd in the bazaar of a sundry, if you pick out the very dirtiest man or woman you can find, be sure he or she is a Tibetan trader: these people cross the snowy range annually about November bringing with them rock-salt, yaks, tails, sometimes, gold dust, musk, and other commodities of various kinds, besides, ships, goats in large flocks. These they sell, and return laden with tobacco, broad-cloth, piece- goods, and other commodities in February, March. During their stay in Darjeeling they live in small light tents which they bring with them. Their favourite encamping ground is in the Lebong spur. It will be observed that there is only one woman in each tent, with five or six men. This is accounted for by polyandry being extensively practiced by the Tibetans. The young woman would be rather fresh complexioned but for a habit they have a daubing their faces over with a preparation of some sort of gum which looks like brown lacquer"³. This description of O'Brien provided an important aspect of commercial picture of Darjeeling. Kalimpong was annexed from Bhutan in 1865 and soon it emerged as an important trade centre especially for Tibet trade. But it does not mean that Tibet trade via Darjeeling was completely abolished. A large proportion of merchandise was imported into Darjeeling as stated by O'Brien in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. And the regular exchange was held between them. This commercial exchange and growing importance of Darjeeling encouraged a number of Tibetans to migrate to the Sadar. In 1891, 1,526 persons were recorded as Tibetan-speaking. As per the census figure of 1901, 1,686 Tibetans resided in Darjeeling which rose to 2,774 in 1931 and 7,679 in 1961. A number of Tibetans had also come over after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Exodus of Tibetan to India began about the middle of 1951, which gained momentum of assumed fairly large proportions in 1956. But the main exodus of Tibetan refugees began arriving in India from 1959 onwards⁴. At that time they did not have any special occupation and embraced any type of livelihoods. Initiatives were taken on behalf of the Government of India and some local philanthropists to provide them with suitable livelihoods. As a result five production centres have come up into being in the district in the last quarter of the twentieth century to attach the Tibetan refugees as trainee-workers, trainer-workers, wage-labourers or as self-employed workers. The five production centres with their respective lines of specialization are as follows: (1) Tibetan Central Training (Handicraft) Centre of Lebong, (2) Agricultural Co-operative Farming Society at Sonada (3) Lamhatta Agricultural Co-operative Society, Kalimpong (4) Kalimpong Handicraft Self-help Co-operative society and (5) Sonada Handicraft, Dairy Poultry and Agricultural Self-help Co-operative Society, Sonada. But these units can provide employment only to a fraction of Tibetan refugees and hence a great number of them have worked either as petty traders and peddlers of handicrafts or as labourers⁵.

Case Study

As befits the Tibetans who were naturally endowed with trading instincts, Darjeeling was developed with many economic activities especially tourism. Hotel and restaurant business provided a ready market which seemed to be more lucrative to the Tibetans and a number of traders entered in this trading. A few instances may clear this picture. One important old Tibetan business family was the Pulger Family who owned and run the 'Bellevue Hotel', and in every way combined the peace and gentleness of that Tibetan family and its culture. Lawang Pulger (1926 – 2007), former director of the Bellevue Hotel, traced his origin from a Tibetan Lepcha family. The hotel is situated on the Mall, Darjeeling's prime area, and overlooks the

Chowrasta, the main square with its magical mix of people from India, Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan. This hotel was established on or around 1872, (it is well documented in survey maps dating back to 1887) and represents the best of colonial “Raj” architecture. It was owned by an English lady until 1942 when it was bought by the present owners' family who have held it now for three generations.

Lawang Pulger was a grandson of Raja Tenduk Pulger, an eminent Lepcha noble during the British Raj. They came to Darjeeling in the early days of the colonial rule. He got involved in import and export trade between Darjeeling and Lhasa in his younger days during the British time and later, worked for His Holiness the Dalai Lama for many years in what were the hardest times in Tibetan history.

To mention a few of his achievements, he was a co-founder of “Tibetan Freedom Press”(the first Tibetan newspaper in exile) of the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre in Darjeeling and of the Central School for Tibetans (CST) in Darjeeling and in Kalimpong. For decades, he served as a Tibetan representative at the Buddhagaya Temple Management Committee. He was awarded a Medal for Distinguished Service from the Government of India. This hotel commenced operations in 1897 and featured a heritage building constructed around the year 1872 in the wood and stone masonry work characteristic of the colonial "Raj style" British architecture. They owned and managed it since 1943. The hotel is divided into 2 sections – the old building which houses ten wood paneled suites and the recently constructed new wing which houses ten double rooms and six suites with double bay windows. The Bellevue Hotel has become a landmark of Darjeeling tourism and mentioned in Lonely Planet, National Geographic Adventure, Let's Go, Rough Guides, Cadogan Guides, and other discriminating travel books, including those published in Japan, Korea and other countries.

Tashi Pulger, the present owner is well educated. Encouraged and assisted by his mother Choedon Pulger, he has taken the steps required to preserve the tradition of the Bellevue Hotel even during the turbulent time of political unrest and harsh competition⁶.

Among the early migrants few Tibetans achieved considerable economic prosperity through hotel business. The Dekeva family made an adventurer bid in this direction. They took the advantage left by the British to establish themselves in the hotel business. This family bought the 'Dekeling Resort and Hotel' constructed in the late 19th century by Sir William Ferguson Ducat. It was named as 'Hawk's Nest Resort'. The mansion is typical of those built by British of the Raj period. Recently it is restored to its original splendour by the Dekeva family. They have tried to combine every comfort and convenience to increase their clientele. Dekeling Resort and Hotel is run by the members of the family altogether. Many domestic and international guests stay here.

Norbu Dekeva, the present proprietor of Dekeling Resort & Hotel, besides being a hotelier, is actively involved in social activities, in both local and Tibetan Community Social Activities. He is the Founder Member and the General Secretary of Manjushree Centre of Tibetan Culture, Darjeeling. Manjushree Centre of Tibetan Culture is a 20 year old non-profit charitable Institution and has actively contributed towards preservation and promotion of Tibetan language and culture. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is very pleased with the work of Manjushree Institute (MCTC).

Norbu Dekeva is also the board member and first General Secretary of Chagpori Tibetan Medical Institute, Darjeeling, re-established in India in 1992 in commemoration of Chagpori Tibet 1696-1959 by late Dr. S.N. Trogawa Rinpoche. Norbu had served as the President/General Secretary of Regional Tibetan Youth Congress. Mrs. Norbu has also offered her contribution to her community by serving as President of Regional Tibetan Women's Association, Darjeeling⁷.

In the heart of Darjeeling, close to the Mall's shopping and entertainment circuit is Hotel Shangri-La and Shangri-La Regency is on the Gandhi Road, are owned by a Tibetan, Ranjan Lama and his English wife, Dawn. They made both the hotels an ideal base for the many local tourist attractions. Originally built by the British, the exterior of the building retains the aura of the British Raj, Shangrila Hotel and restaurant are now run by this family for two generations. Besides these hotels there are also some restaurants run by the Tibetans such as Kunga, Seven Seventeen,(along with hotel) Dekeva, ,(along with hotel) and so on. In this way, the Tibetans have gradually established their grip in the tourism business.

Many Tibetan traders were engaged in wholesale and retail trade including import and export. Initially, they transacted trade between Tibet and Kalimpong before the Chinese occupation. A few of them also carried on this trade from Darjeeling. The trade was worked on a system of advance. European and Indian buyers advanced loans to the larger Tibetan merchants, though not to the small traders who brought down only two or three hundred maunds. For these advances they charged 1 per cent. monthly. During spring and summer the Tibetan merchants gave advances to the owners of the sheep in Tibet, and arranged to take delivery from the following October. By giving these loans six months or more before taking delivery they were able to buy the wool at a rate per maund three or four rupees lower than would otherwise have been possible⁸.

Recently the migrant Tibetans have established the 'Dragon Market' on the Post Office Road. They trade almost every important item especially cloth and stationery goods. They import goods from the traders of Sikkim Bhutan and Tibet via Kalimpong and Siliguri. A few words may be worth mentioning regarding the role of the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Centre in bringing about the displaced, disabled Tibetans in the main stream of the commercial pursuits of Darjeeling. It started on October 2, 1959, the Centre undertook multifarious activities ranging from the production of handicrafts and training of artisans and craftsman. Today the Centre has been exporting to 36 countries all over the world. Besides traditional items such as Tibetan carpets, wood, metal and leather works, they have also experimented in testing new production lines incorporating traditional Tibetan motifs, which would find a ready market both here and abroad. Among the successful items are footwear and coats which, while keeping the traditional Tibetan styles, are nevertheless modified for suitable wear with European clothes. During its 40 years of existence the Centre has been able to train 1600 persons in various crafts. Out of this, between 1000 to 1200 persons have left the Centre to set up their own enterprises. All of them are now fully self-supporting and several of them are doing very well⁹.

TRADE WITH TIBETAN MAINLAND

Even prior to the annexation of Darjeeling the British had turned their attention towards the entrepot trade between Tibet and British possession Bengal. For this purpose they had sent several trade missions in these Himalayan zones, first being that of Bogle of 1774. These missions (mentioned earlier) revealed that the Tibetans paid gold for commodities from Bengal, such as rice, cottons, tobacco, and coral that were shipped through the Kathmandu Valley and some less significant trade routes in the east. Tibet, in turn, acted as conduit for Chinese silks and teas as well as a source for valuable shawl wool, dyestuffs, and medicinal plants. More to the point, however, the British saw the control of trans-Himalayan trade as a means of gaining access to untapped markets in the north. Hard-pressed to meet their commitment to unload British broadcloth in India, the Company's directors suffered substantial losses in having to pay silver bullion for Indian cottons, gauzes, and silks which they exported to England. In this era, (1770s) when the overseas trade with China had not yet developed, Hastings saw great opportunity in introducing British goods into China via Tibet¹⁰. Therefore, the Tibet trade appeared more lucrative than the other Himalayan countries.

A very little volume of trade reached into the Sadar Sub-Division. Around the last quarter of the nineteenth century the Tibetan traders were found in the Sunday market in Darjeeling as stated above.

In course of October to December 1873 J.Ware Edgar, deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling had visited the Sikkim and Tibetan frontier to explore the trade prospects with Tibet. In his report he had mentioned some commercial transactions between Darjeeling and Tibet and pointed out that it had great possibilities if roads and bridges over Teesta River were properly constructed. From his report, however, it is not very clear whether the people who traded were actually Tibetans or people living in the border areas of Sikkim. In any case it was clear that these people had access to Phari in Chumbi valley and they had already started exploring the possibilities of trade with Darjeeling. On 28th October 1873 Edgar also met some traders who were on their way to Darjeeling where they wanted to exchange coarse blanket for tobacco. At Keu Laka he met a family of herds-men from whom he learnt that they had supplied butter and cream

cheese to the markets of Darjeeling and Lhasa. These markets were mainly dependent for beef, butter and cheese of the herds of cow of the Phari valley. It was not uncommon for a family in this area to keep a flock of four or five thousand sheep. In one particular instance, he mentioned a man with his wife who came up with from Gangtok 'with murwa of their own growing valued at rupees six only which they were taking to Chumbi for sale. They said they meant to take the proceeds to Phari where they would buy salt which they would bring to Darjeeling, where they might probably lay out the proceeds of its sale in an investment for the Tiber market, if they found time to do so before next years sowing season'¹¹ He further added that during his stay in East Sikkim he 'regularly met people either coming from or on their way to Darjeeling with goods, the value of which at first sight seemed quite disproportionate to the labour that had to be undergone in taking them to market, but I have no doubt they find the traffic pays them. These merwa sellers expected to get six rupees for their merwa 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 32, while the value of their merwa at Guntok was only was Rs 4-8'¹².

After the annexation of Kalimpong in 1865, the Tibet trade passed through Kalimpong via Sikkim. Therefore the importance of Darjeeling for Tibetan trade was reduced. On the whole, the trade from Tibet to the Darjeeling District passed through two routs "one route leave Tibet for Sikkim via the Jalap La, enters the District north of Pedong and passes through Kalimpong. The other route enters Sikkim by the Nathu La and passes through Gangtok" .In 1962 all the outposts dealt Indo-Tibet were shut down.

There was a considerable amount of traffic at Pedong, near Darjeeling and a very large portion of it comprised of that from Tibet, which had been registered earlier at Chumbi. The chief imports here were raw and manufactured wool, brick tea, silk- piece- goods, gram and bhutta the chief export being European and Indian piece- goods, manufactured wool, sugar, tobacco, gunny bags, gram and tea. Certain articles figured both among the imports and exports. Tea for example was both imported and exported, the value of the import increasing in 1906-07 as compared with 1905-06 by Rs. 640, while the value of that exported decreased by Rs. 233. It was interesting to note that the value of the manufactured wool imported increased by Rs. 9295, while the value of that exported decreased by Rs. 1412'¹³.

Table-1.1
Value and volume of imports from Tibet to Darjeeling:

Darjeeling	1904-05	1905-06	1906-07
	Rs	Rs	Rs
Silk piece good	1607	4,808	Nil
Wool (manufacture)	Nil	600	70
	Mds	Mds	Mds
Grain and pulse	2473	2,042	630
Bhutta a other food grain	573	274	278
Ghee	254	297	46

Source: Proceedings of the Bengal Government, Report on the Trade Frontier Stations in Bengal by F.B Badley Birt, Calcutta, 26, February 1908,xiii

Table-1.2
Value and volume of exports from Darjeeling to Tibet:

Darjeeling	1904-05	1905-06	1906-07
	Rs	Rs	Rs

Silk piece-goods	11,619	25,250	530
Tea (Indian)	8341	10,692	3,370
Cotton piece	585	Nil	1,119
	Mds	Mds	Mds
Salt	2253	2071	327
Rice	2,016	2009	346
Kerosene oil	899	703	56

Source: Proceedings of the Bengal Government, Report on the Trade Frontier Stations in Bengal by F.B Badley Birt, Calcutta, 26, February 1908,xiii

CONCLUSION

In fact, from the last quarter of the last century commercial picture of the Sadar has undergone a significant change because of the presence of the Tibetans in great numbers. Being 'born traders' the Tibetans have opted business as their chief means of livelihood in Darjeeling. They have gradually entrenched in every possible commercial pursuits including wholesale and retail trade of groceries, cloth, house building materials and hotel, restaurant and transport business and so on. At present, their growing commercial encroachment has resulted in an intense competition with the old business communities like Marwari, Bihari, Nepalese etc.. The Tibetans are not, as a rule on good terms with the old local business communities. Feelings of dislike and jealousy come into play. As a result socio- economic tension is creeping into the wider arena of Darjeeling.

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