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## Assam-Bhutan Trade Relation Since Medieval Period

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### ABSTRACT

*Of all the neighbouring hill tribes of Assam, the Bhutanese alone had an organized government. It was since the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that Bhutan was ruled by a diarchy consisting of Dharma Raja with supreme religious and political power. Dev Raja was in-charge of the general administration. The two rulers were jointly called Dev-Dharma Rajas. Their territory was bounded by Sikkim on the west, Tibet on the north, the territory of the Akas on the east and Assam and Bengal on the south.*

*The Bhutanese kept their trade relation with the plains of Assam through the usual **Duars** (Gates). There were nine such duars on Assam frontier of Bhutan. They were, east to west, Charduar (Chariduar), Kariapar, Buriguma, Kalling, Gharkola, Boksa, Chapaguri, Chapakhamar, and Bijni. The Bhutanese of Kariapar duar called themselves subordinate of the Towang Raja, a tributary of Lasha, while those of Charduar regarded themselves as completely independent. The administrative machinery of these two duar areas differed from the Bhutanese government of **Punakha**. These two duars were very important in carrying on Assam's trade with Bhutan.*

This paper makes an attempt to study the old trade relation between Assam and Bhutan and its present state. As trade is a major source of income and exposure and the study of **Assam-Bhutan trade relation** during the rule of Ahom kingdom in Assam is very relevant for the present. This paper will give some new idea to increase the trade relation between Assam and Bhutan.

Of all the neighbouring hill tribes of Assam, the Bhutanese alone had an organized government. It was since the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that Bhutan was ruled by a diarchy consisting of Dharma Raja with supreme religious and political power. Dev Raja was in-charge of the general administration. The two rulers were jointly called Dev-Dharma Rajas. Their territory was bounded by Sikkim on the west, Tibet on the north, the territory of the Akas on the east and Assam and Bengal on the south.

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The Kariapar duar was by far the most extensive and valuable division. The duar was divided into seven sub-divisions which were placed under the administration of seven respective Rajas known as “Sath Rajas”. They were subordinate to Towang Raja, a tributary of Lhasa. All the trade of Assam with Tibet passed through this Kariapar duar via Chouna, a place of two month’s journey from Lhasa where a market was established. The Assamese merchants used to camp at a place called Geegunshur with their merchandise, which was four miles away from Chouna. The Assamese merchandise generally consist of Rice, Tussa cloth ( a kind of coarse silk cloth woven by Assamese weman), Iron and Lac, Skins, Buffalo horns, Pearls and Corals. In 1809 A.D. this trade amounted to Rupees Two Lakhs approximately. The import by Assamese consisted of Rock Salt, Wool, Gold Dust, Horses, Chinese silk etc.

In the middle of 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the regime of Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663 A.D.) the control of the Duars (passes) on the frontier of Darrang and Kamrup (the seven passes) went into the control of *Bhutias* (Bhutanese) and they permanently came to occupy the plains territory adjacent to passes as far as Gohain Kamal Ali. It should be noted that at that time Kamrup was not under the Ahom rule. Therefore it is probable that when arrangement was made, it concerned only the three passes and the plains district of Darrang. When Ahoms took possession of Kamrup in 1667 A.D., the Ahom government was compelled to acknowledge the Bhutanese as the owner of the four passes on the frontier of Kamrup, together with the plains districts as far as Gohain Kamal Ali. The Ahom made the written arrangement with Bhutanese that Darrang duars were to be annually surrendered to the Ahom government from the month of Ashar to Aswin (i.e. from the 15th of June to the 15th of October). In lieu of the grant of the passes and the territories adjacent to them, the Bhutanese had to pay an annual tribute to Ahom government which consisted of Yaktails, Ponies, Musk, Gold dust, Blankets, and knives. The Bhutanese government of Punakha thus came into possession of the Duars and the plain territory as far as Gohain Kamal Ali. They also retained the posts of Subahs as the governors of passes to defend them.

The written agreement between Ahoms and Bhutanese was later confirmed by late Mr. William Robinson and Mr. Colonel White. Mr. White stated that when British took over Assam in 1825-26 A.D. and appointed David Scott as the agent to the Governor General in Lower Assam, Mr. Scott found the treaty with Bhutan in *Pera papers* (legal papers kept in box) of one Jugoo Ram Majinder who was living at Guwahati. Mr. Scott reserved to the British government the *same amount of tribute and period of jurisdiction* over the tract of the country known by the names of seven duars or passes as enjoyed by the Ahom kings of Assam.

The dual control over the duars allowed to continue by Scott fell oppressively on their inhabitants. Lawlessness prevailed in duars areas in spite of British efforts for securing peace. Theoretically under the *Deb* and *Dharma* Rajas in Punakha, the Duars were under control of the *Tongso Penlop*, the governor of eastern Bhutan. His officers not only controlled their lucrative trade but also started extorting everything in the name of tribute. The company officials were no less responsible for the prevailing anarchy. On 28 May 1835, a village near Bijni was raided and eleven persons were kidnapped. On 16 November yet another raid occurred in Kalling, followed by robbery from the Banska Duar. The Principal Assistant Kamrup, Captain Archibald Bogle found out that all was the work of the Bhutanese boarder officials. Banska was promptly

occupied and Punakha immediately dispatched *Zinkaffs* (Bhutanese messengers) to Assam for a compromise. At the end of 1837 it was no longer a question of peace in frontier because the tributes particularly of the Kamrup Duars were more than 50% in arrear. For settlement of these problems the Government of India pressed on by the Assam authority decided to send Captain Robert Pemberton on a mission to Bhutan. Pemberton was able to draft a treaty with Deb Raja but Deb Raja declined to sign the treaty for the fear of offending the powerful Tonso Penlop. The problem dragged on for another two years. In the mean time a great deal of information had been acquired for the British rights as successor to Ahom rulers over Koriapara and subsequently declared Koriapara as permanent attachment to Darrang. On Christmas day of 1841, Bhutan Duars were annexed to British by a proclamation.

A change in policy towards Bhutan can be traced from July 1862 when Cecil Beadon, Lt. Governor of Bengal agreed that some course of action of a decisive character must be taken in respect of Bhutan to resolve the pending disputes over the Duars. He suggested that a mission should be dispatched to Bhutan and a permanent agent should be placed at the Bhutanese court.

Accordingly, a Viceroy's messenger was sent to explain to the Deb and Dharma Raja of Bhutan about the objective of the proposed mission. The Deb Raja received the messenger very warmly at *Tassisudon* in September 1862 and expressed willingness to settle the matters relating to the revenues of Falakata. He assured the messenger that a Bhutanese messenger (*Zinkaff*) would soon visit Calcutta and he will himself meet the Agent in Assam Duars to settle the existing disputes, but he decline to receive the mission. The Bhutanese messenger never arrived nor did the Deb Raja take any initiative for his meeting with the Agent in Assam frontier. The British government of India decided on August 1863 to dispatch a mission under Ashley Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal. The Deb and Dharma Rajas were informed of the objectives of the mission and they were requested to send a messenger to escort the mission to the Bhutanese Court. No reply was received from Bhutan and in the mean time, the Deb Raja was replaced by a revolution. Still the mission under Eden left for Bhutan in November 1863. On the way, the mission was subjected to most insolent treatment, involving threats, intimidation and robbery. Anyhow, Eden reached Punakha on 13 March 1864 to find that the Deb and the Dharma Rajas were mere puppets in the hands of **Tongso Pilo**, who had established himself as *de facto* ruler of Bhutan through a revolution. He refused to accept the draft treaty of Eden and in stead physically forced Eden to sign an agreement dictated by Tongso Pilo himself. It hardened the attitude of the British government towards Bhutan.

The military strength in the frontier was fully mobilized and the British army moved from Guwahati, Goalpara, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Dalimkote. The Bhutanese outposts in Baksa duar, Dewangiri, Bijni and, Sidli (all inside Assam) fell in rapid succession and by the end of January 1865, the Duars and the hill forts came under British control. The *treaty of Sinchula* was signed on November 1865 by which the government of Bhutan surrendered all the Duars and the hill tract between river Teesta and Jaldhaka to British authority and released all the captives detained in Bhutan. The treaty of Sinchula was a land mark in Anglo-Bhutan relation. It accrued several benefits to the British, politically and economically. The territory surrendered by Bhutan yielded revenue of several lakhs rupees to British over and above the rich source of timber and possible cultivation of tea and other plantation. It also provided the British with a road to Lhasa

and placed them on a strategic advantage to deal with any aggression against Assam and North Bengal.

Again coming back to Assam –Bhutan relationship, some Bhutanese traveled to Assam for commercial as well as religious purpose also. The people from east Bhutan came to Assam on pilgrimage in winter. Halo, near Guwahati is a Buddhist pilgrimage site, which according to local belief, is Kushi Nagar, the site of Buddha's historical "death". Hajo, since 17<sup>th</sup> century is a pilgrimage and trading place for Bhutanese in Assam. The town is holy for the Hindus, Muslims and the Buddhists. The Muslims practiced metal casting and the nearby town Sualkuchi became an important centre for production and trade of famous and unique Assamese silk. During their pilgrimages, the Bhutanese traded with Assamese and imported different products to different markets of Assam. They were mainly Sadia, Barhat, Udalguri, Daranga, Simlabari etc. The product exchanged between Bhutanese and Assamese traders were mainly woolen products, cotton and Assamese raw silk and dyes.

As in Bhutan, weaving is a prestigious activity in Assam as in case of dyeing. Bodos, a tribe of Assam had close contact with the Bhutanese because of their geographical proximity. Bodos were engaged in cultivation of silk worm from which they obtained raw silk named *Paat, Muga, and Endi*. These were traded with Bhutan. This practice is still going on, especially during winter. Daranga *Mela* (fair) is still favorite place for Assamese and Bhutanese for exchange of merchandise. Bhutanese dogs, one of the rare and finest breed of dog, is very popular in Assam. Many Assamese people in the border can speak fluent Bhutanese and vice versa because of ongoing trade practices and cultural exchange. Currencies of both India and Bhutan are equally accepted in the border areas of Assam. This trade relation was little bit hampered because of insurgency problem of Assam. Although this problem is not yet over, its severity has declined and it is hoped that very soon the original trade relation between Bhutanese and Assamese will not only resume but will increase in multifold for mutual benefit of both parties. In this age of trade liberalization, Bhutan needs to give importance to the production of its indigenous artifacts and products where Bhutan has comparative advantage, especially woolen products. These products have great demand in India, where Assam may be used as corridor of export of Bhutanese products to India. In this way the Bhutanese small scale producers will be benefited both monetarily and culturally (due to exposure), which in turn, will contribute to their Gross National Happiness.

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