

From Treaties to Trade: The Evolution of Commerce in the Eastern Himalayas, 1770-1892

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***Abstract:**The paper discusses the historical trade networks in the Eastern Himalayan region, focusing on the interconnections between Bengal, Sikkim, and Tibet. The paper delves into the political and economic factors that influenced trade, such as treaties, conventions, and British interventions. It provides detailed data on imports and exports between Bengal, Sikkim, and Tibet, shedding light on the commodities exchanged and the changing trade patterns over the years. Additionally, the abstract highlights the impact of historical events, such as the Occupation of Lingtu in 1886 and the signing of conventions, on trade dynamics. Overall, the abstract provides a comprehensive overview of the complex trade relationships in the Eastern Himalayas during the pre and post-colonial period.*

Keywords: Bengal, British Intervention, Commodities, Convention, Exports, Imports etc.

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Introduction

Trade whether within or outside, is a part of a convoluted exchange for any nation or kingdom. Individuals, societies and nations exchange commodities, ideas and culture often leading to the growth of an elaborate trade network. Such trade networks served as a lifeline to their economies.

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But such trade for its success had to depend on multiple factors such as, tariff, trade barriers, culture, language, religion, globalization etc.

Buddhism and trade had a close link together which was symbiotic.¹ The physical proximity of the Eastern Himalayan kingdom helped in developing a pan Buddhist cultural identity which was an important uniting feature amongst the Himalayan Kingdom of Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and even Bengal. Tibet had developed a well organized trade network which reached as far as Bengal during the pre and post colonial period and was the cornerstone of the region's economy. Since ancient times; missionaries, merchants and pilgrims could move freely within these regions. In this process, Buddhist merchants created a diaspora of trade networks and an entrepreneurial web of import and export trade.²

By mid eighteenth century the shadows of imperialism was casted over the Indian subcontinent. The Dual Governance of 1765 and the Famine of 1770 in Bengal created a serious financial crisis for the English East India Company, which could be solved only with a new commercial venture towards its northern borders. Following this, the Court of Directors wished to established contact with its northern neighbors in the Eastern Himalayas. Since the Gurkha expansion in the eighteenth century had blocked trade routes to Tibet through Nepal the Company sought alternative routes primarily though Bhutan. In this spirit, British official missions were commissioned to renew the ancient Indo-Tibetan trade through various Commercial Missions, which lasted for almost one and half century.

By 1860s, British political control of Eastern Himalayas was complete. The expansion of trade in the nineteenth century now channeled the British imperial engine into the highlands of Asia. The development of colonial trade in the Eastern Himalayan region took place in stages; pre-1875 and post-1875. Here a strong trade network developed, which was more organized and systematized.

II

The Indo-Tibetan trade under the premises of our observation henceforth refers to direct Bengal trade with Tibet via Sikkim. Although India had commercial interaction with Tibet since the ancient period, the Tibet trade with Bengal through Sikkim became significant only during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Bengal-Tibet trade steadily progressed after 1861, despite of the steady opposition of the Tibetan and the Chinese officials against the British initiatives to establish trade relations. The commercial inroads into Tibet were a result of elaborate attempts by the British India Government and its foreign trade experts and policy makers after the late Eighteenth century through Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim.³

By the year 1860, the Government of India had connected Darjeeling with the mainland India. British mercantilism brought along extensive connectivity with new roads connecting Bengal with Sikkim and beyond. Grant recommended to “open traffic not only between themselves and the inhabitants of Darjeeling but also between Bengal and Chinese territory.”⁴ Again by this time the

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British was also focused towards construction of road to Lhasa through Sikkim. Ashley Eden wrote in 1861:

A considerable trade will spring up between Lhasa and Darjeeling. The Tibetans will be too glad to exchange gold dust, musk, borax, wool and salt for English cloth, tobacco, etc.; and the people of Sikkim will gain as carriers of this trade, and their government will raise considerable revenue from the transit duties.⁵

Apprehension of profit led to the opening of Bengal-Tibet trade through Sikkim. It was reported by the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, Ashley Eden that in the year 1860-61 there was steady annual increase of trade both with Sikkim and Tibet.

Table 1: Bengal's Trade with Sikkim and Tibet 1860-1864

Trade	Trade with Sikkim (In Rupees)	Trade with Tibet (In Rupees)
Imports	89,535	64,005
Exports	19,450	43,600

Source: Letter dated 25th January 1875, from Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Secretary Government of India.NAI, New Delhi.

The Anglo-Sikkimese Treaty or the Treaty of Tumlong in 1861 initiated this trade network between Sikkim and the British India. Hence, free trade was established between the two countries as per the provisions of Article 8 and Article 10 of the Treaty.⁶

The Bengal Government on 20th May 1864, ordered the Superintendent of Darjeeling to prepare a report on the trade between Darjeeling, Sikkim and Tibet. Chebu Lama or Tseepa Adan⁷ gave the details of this trade report. The list of commodities imported from Sikkim to Darjeeling, included horses, cattle (sheep and goats), millet, rice, wax, salt, blankets, musk, orange, millet, ghee rice, copper and lime. The report reflected that imports in 1863 were nearly double of those of 1860. The trade value for four years amounted to rupees 89,535. The articles of export included tobacco, metal, cloth utensils and coral. The Report was optimistic which indicated great export of tea to Sikkim and Tibet in future replacing the traditional brick tea imported from Lhasa and China.⁸

By 1870's the Government of India was very much driven with the idea of expanding its commercial activities. For this, it started to visit the Kingdom of Sikkim and its frontier towards Tibet.

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The Governor General in Council Sir George Campbell in this regard met with the Maharaja of Sikkim at Darjeeling in 1873. He was able to get the support and cooperation of Sikkim in furthering his Government's wishes for the development of trade with Central Asia.⁹ As a result, of the meeting JW Edgar was sent to examine the conditions and prospect of trade with Tibet. The intention was to strengthen connectivity by making a road through Sikkim to the Tibetan frontier.¹⁰

The Report of Administration of Bengal 1874-75, added another justifiable cause and was extremely crucial in supporting the policy of opening of trade link with Tibet through Sikkim. Edgar provided a full detail of the extent and character of the then existing trade and highlighted the possibility of furthering trade linkages. He mentioned that there was a great scope for the English broadcloth, salt, ghee, rice, indigo, silk goods and ponies. He further mentioned that there was a remarkable circulation of Indian rupees from Assam via Tibet to Kashmir.¹¹ People from both sides Sikkim including Kalimpong and Darjeeling and Tibet were engaged in trade. While the majority of the British Indian subjects were not allowed to enter Tibet for the purpose of trade, a huge number of Tibetan merchants crossed the border and poured in the bazaars of British India.

Report on the Administration of Bengal 1874-75, provides us with a list of items that was exported to or imported by Tibet through Sikkim. The items of exports were mainly millets, rice, oranges and madder. The items of imports were mainly ponies, blankets, salt, jewelries, yak tails, China caps, musk, silks, tea and sheep. It is obvious from the previous list 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.

Trade between Sikkim and Bengal for the year 1876-77 shows that Timber was the main item of export followed by cattle and miscellaneous crops while indigo was a major item of import. The statistics gives us following picture.

Table 2: Sikkim's Trade with Bengal in 1876-77

Exports to Bengal	Rs	Imports From Bengal	Rs
Timber	7,08,708	Indigo	66,000
Cattle	19,710	Cattle	23,200
Miscellaneous Rain Crops	14,457	Brass and Copper	14,520

Source: *Report of Bengal's External Trade for the Year 1876-77*. Government of Bengal. p. 270.

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III

Registration of Trade Traffic from 1875

The Bengal Government in Finance Department passed a resolution on 23rd August 1875 sanctioned certain arrangements for the registration of traffic between Bengal and the Eastern Himalayan kingdom. The Government of Bengal began registering the trade traffic between Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan from the month of September 1875. This structure of traffic registration was however, modified to suit the orders of the Government of India and a general structure of traffic registration were adopted in Bengal and the North-Western Provinces with effect from 1st June 1879.¹² Accordingly, the Government of Bengal started assimilating statistics and published them with the title of *Report on the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim (Tibet) and Bhutan*.

Trade between Bengal and Tibet from 1875

Prior to the year 1885 trade between Bengal and Tibet and Sikkim were clubbed together in the *Report of Bengal's External trade*. It was only after 1885 the separate figures of trade between Bengal and Tibet was recorded. Hence, after 1885 the title of these Reports came to be noted as *Report on the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Tibet and Sikkim and Bhutan*. The important trading stations between Bengal i.e. from Darjeeling district to Tibet were Kalimpong and Rhenock. They were important points in the high roads between Darjeeling and the Tibetan frontier. Trade from Tibet, which came down through Rhenock connected the plains through Lava and Damdin yet this trade did not touch Kalimpong. However, some trade also went through Kalimpong into the mart of Gangtok in Sikkim without passing Rhenock.¹³

Table 3: Total Value of trade Registered between Bengal and Tibet in Rupees

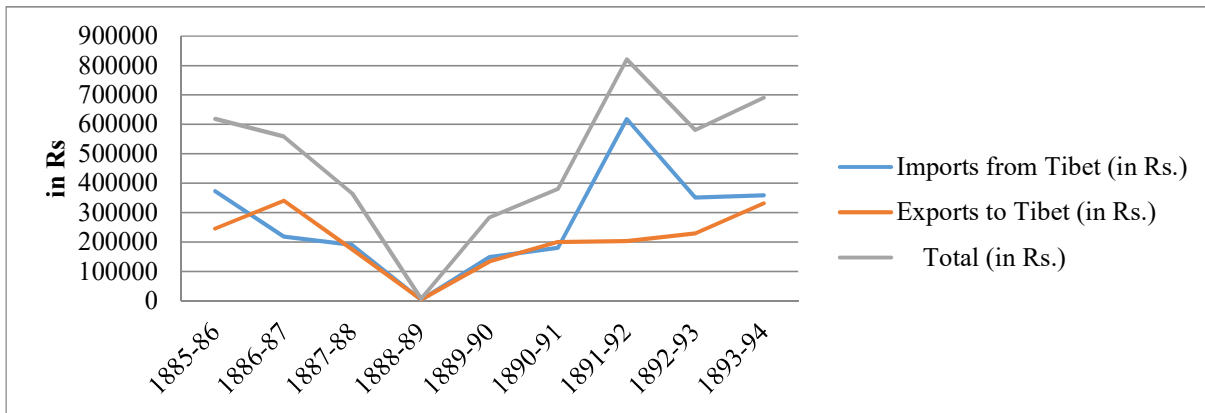
Years	Imports from Tibet (in Rs.)	Exports to Tibet (in Rs.)	Total (in Rs.)
1885-86	372735	245714	618449
1886-87	218143	340462	558605
1887-88	190427	174799	365226

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1888-89	3168	4181	7349
1889-90	149275	134085	283360
1890-91	180893	199788	380681
1891-92	618146	203131	821277
1892-93	351519	229117	580636
1893-94	358799	331613	690412

Note: Separate Statistics for Bengal trade with Tibet was recorded only after 1885

Source: Sources: *RETB* for the year 1881-82, 1886-87 to 1888-89, 1890-91, and 1893-94



Source: Based on Table 5.7

The Report also mentioned a great deal of valuable trade between Bengal and Tibet were transacted without any registration. There are several such cases cited in the trade reports. As per the Report of 1886-87, Thendup Pulger an official reveal that individual Tibetan monks greatly involved themselves in the Indo-Tibetan trade. However, there was a blockade at Lingtu in 1886, at the Sikkim-Tibetan frontier due to Tibetan aggression (as mentioned earlier). Higher monks affiliated with the great Lhasa monasteries were allowed to engage in the trade through Sikkim and Darjeeling route, while for the lay traders this route was practically closed. The report further reveals that a monk of the Sera

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monastery in Lhasa arrived at Rhenock en-route to Calcutta for trading purposes. He brought with him yak tails and musk worth Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 3,000 in cash. He was allowed access through Lingtu as he represented Sera monastery. The monk conducted his business in Calcutta and returned the same route with articles of trade, which were not registered.¹⁴

¹⁵Another such instance is of a Kashmiri Muslim merchant who had sent musk valued at Rs. 80,000 to Darjeeling through Kongra Lama Pass and Lachen valley. After taking his merchandise he left for Benares, Delhi and Bombay and after three months returned to Tibet through Nepal with Indian merchandise. Even the Deputy Commissioner reports of meeting six Tibetan traders taking Rangpur tobacco (which were in great demand in Tibet) to Gyantse by a circuitous and difficult route through Nepal in order to avoid the blockade at the Jeylep-la. Similarly, another monk of the Chai-riI monastery arrived at Darjeeling with 2 ponies for riding, 25 laden mules, 32 tolas¹⁶ of gold dust and Rs. 35,000 in silver. Then he continued to Calcutta and Bombay and came back with broadcloth, chintzs, turquoise, corals and other valuable commodities, which he took to Tibet without registration.¹⁷

Table: 4. Total Value of goods imported from Tibet to Bengal in Rupees from 1875

Years	Yak tails	Wool raw	Horse, ponies and mules	Wool manufactured	Musk	Tea, foreign	Silver	Silk manufactured (Indian)
1885-86	70629	30058	110970	25485	36380	1734	NIL	NIL
1886-87	17565	24383	33750	5375	9376	2296	NIL	NIL
1887-88	58596	51154	43290	25883	6081	4592	NIL	NIL
1888-89	842	358	900	707	NIL	271	NIL	NIL
1889-90	37394	33978	27360	16054	5241	4383	15920	6920
1890-91	44795	61829	31590	14426	16091	3023	2790	1378
1891-92	68317	177305	17556	16621	37839	4277	NIL	NIL
1892-93	48180	248930	19170	7495	18492	2849	NIL	NIL

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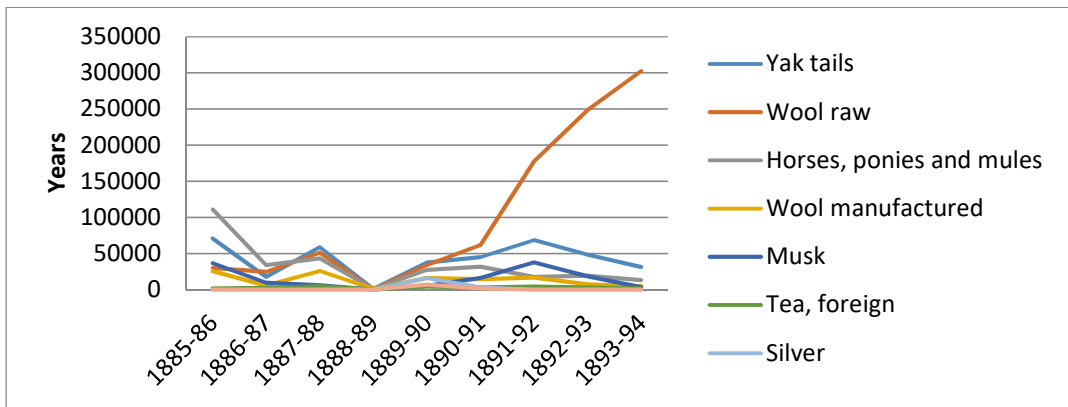
1893-94	31463	302498	12870	4698	3343	1505	NIL	NIL
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Note: Statistics for the trade between Bengal and Tibet are registered and cited in separate column only after 1885.

Source: Sources: *RETB* for the year 1881-82, 1886-87 to 1888-89, 1890-91, and 1893-94.

The Report suggests that Bengal trade with Tibet improved after the Sikkim Expedition of 1888 and the signing of the Anglo- Chinese Convention relating to Sikkim and Tibet, in 17th March 1890.¹⁸ The Convention settled the status of Sikkim which now came under the protection of the British Government, allowing the British Political Officer to reside in Sikkim. The Convention also allowed Regulations of trade between the two countries which led to the opening of three trade agencies (*marts*) in Tibet. These were at Gyantse, 120 miles south-west of Lhasa, at Yatung, in the Chumbi valley just across the border from Sikkim and at Gartok, in a distant western Tibet.¹⁹ The trade figures also show that there was a noticeable improvement in import trade and the trade in raw wool rose significantly. *The Report on the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan for the year 1893-1894*, refers that raw wool trade alone formed 84.31% of the total imports that year (See Table 4 and Figure 2).²⁰ Thus we noticed a steep rise in the export of raw wool from Tibet from 1889 onwards.

Figure 2: Total value of goods imported from Tibet to Bengal 1885-86 to 1893-94



Source: Based on Table 4

Table 5 : Total value of goods Exported to Tibet from Bengal in Rupees

Name of the Articles	1885-86	1886-87	1887-88	1888-89	1889-90	1890-91	1891-92	1892-93	1893-94
Cotton piece goods European	53426	103566	77772	2256	40910	69554	72077	90487	109516
Tobacco	16818	11987	21794	61	6867	5461	9986	20467	22583
Indigo	7665	25875	17388	NIL	19872	15395	16066	10446	37013
Horses, ponies and mules	49050	33030	9990	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL

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Jewellery	NIL	1600	7660	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Other kinds of dyeing materials	NIL	NIL	6927	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Wool manufactured (European)	23818	73565	6753	1862	14817	28500	31925	40803	38702
Brass and Copper	9111	20646	5022	NIL	7500	10763	8402	12704	26639
Cotton twist and yarns (European)	NIL	5900	3550	NIL	2114	4410	5880	5859	7142
Iron	2282	1704	2868	NIL	2427	3076	4121	3036	5915
Chinese and Japanese wares	NIL	NIL	2328	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Silk manufactured (Indian)	952	1792	1463	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Other metals	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	1208	2914	4371	1635	4651
Provisions other than Ghee	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	1500	3710	5278
Shell-lac	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL	2961	1870	5704

Note: Statistics for the trade between Bengal and Tibet are registered and mentioned in separate column only after 1885.

Source: *RETB* for the year 1881-82, 1886-87 to 1888-89, 1890-91, and 1893-94.

Trade between Bengal and Sikkim from 1875

The Report on Bengal's External Trade 1881-1882, cites that Pedong and Rangeet were two trading stations, which registered trade between Bengal (Darjeeling District), and Sikkim.²¹ The Bengal-Tibet entrepot trade through Sikkim went through the town of Rhenock towards a larger trading centre at Kalimpong. Here, traders from Tibet especially Khampas, Tromwopas of the Chumbi valley brought trading goods along with the Bhutanese traders.²²

Table 6: Total Value of trade Registered between Bengal and Sikkim in Rupees

Years	Imports from Sikkim	Exports to Sikkim	Total
1879-80	251491	48085	299576
1880-81	167960	80808	248858
1881-82	167533	86011	253544
1885-86	75855	78641	154496
1886-87	104959	51833	156792

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1887-88	174836	76095	250750
1888-89	124636	75723	200359
1889-90	139753	110558	250311
1890-91	150580	123226	273806
1891-92	220157	126989	347146
1892-93	243591	180919	424510
1893-94	283111	207068	490179

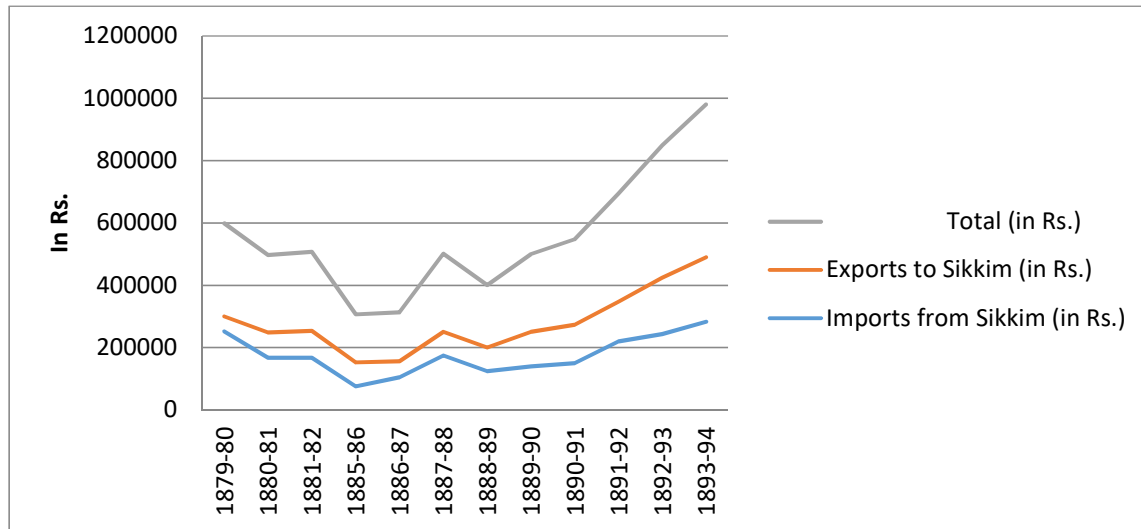
Note: Statistics for the year 1882-83, 1883-84, 1884-85 are not available.

Source: *RETB* for the year 1881-82, 1886-87 to 1888-89, 1890-91, and 1893-94.

The Report further reveals that the Lieutenant- Governor expressed his dissatisfaction towards the inaccuracy of the figures that were submitted relating to the Bengal trade with Sikkim and Tibet.²³ Thus in order to avoid double record of the trade figures at the station of Kalimpong and Rhenock and henceforth, the figures came to be registered separately from the financial year 1885-86 onwards.²⁴ The figures also indicate that in the year 1880-81, there has not been much increase in trade despite of the anticipation of the opening of the Darjeeling Railway and the completion of a good road to the Jeylep Pass. The Report also mentioned that due to heavy snow on the passes and of the fear of small- pox which had affected Pedong and Kalimpong deterred the traders from crossing the frontier.²⁵

Figure 3: Trade between Bengal and Sikkim from 1879-80 to 1893-94

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Source: Based on Table 5.10

Table 7: Sikkim’s Trade with Bengal 1889-90

Main Exports to Bengal	Rs.	Main Imports from Bengal	Rs.
Rain Crops	45,859	Cotton Piece Goods	33,775
Brass and Copper	15,500	Husked Rice	13,477
Grams and Pulses	13,417	Tobacco	7,271
Vegetable Oil	9,650	Intoxicating Drugs	6,480
Fruits and Vegetables	9,519	Provisions	6,301
Silver	4,300	Cattle	5,194
Cattle	2,712	Salt	4,799
Hides of Cattle	2,509	Fruits and Vegetables	2,888
Spices	2,489	Brass and Copper	2,470

Source: *RETB* for the year 1888-1889.

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The aforementioned table shows that the list of Sikkim's export consisted mainly of agricultural, mineral and forest produce, while she imported industrial products like cotton piece goods and agricultural products that could not be produced in Sikkim. Towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, there was shift in the pattern of import and export, which was primarily due to the initiation of the Indo Tibetan trade, which passed through the kingdom of Sikkim. In the case of brass and copper, which were initially imported from Tibet (as seen in Table 5), began to be exported to Bengal, although a small quantity continued to be imported (as shown in Table 7). This was because Sikkim began to import these minerals from Tibet and then began exporting them to Bengal.

With the appointment of the first British Political Officer, JC White in 1889, the British authority over the kingdom of Sikkim was firmly established, initiating the trade between Sikkim and Bengal.²⁶ Sikkim's export during the late 19th century was mainly forest produce, agriculture and minerals. The import list shows mainly industrial products like cotton piece goods and agricultural products that could not be produced in Sikkim. However, some items like brass and copper, fruits and vegetables, cattle were both in the import and export list.

The occupation of Lingtu fort which was an important trade garrison in the year 1886 by the Tibetan forces affected the trade, the hostile occupation continued till the year 1887, which finally led to a full scale war until the peace was restored in 1891-92. The Convention between Great Britain and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet was signed in 1890, which clearly demarcated the boundaries between Sikkim and Tibet.

Although, the Occupation of Lingtu in 1886 by the Tibetan forces and the subsequent Sikkim expedition of 1888 led to the decrease in trade and cessation of entire traffic, the Report mentioned that trade continued. Post 1886 trends also show that there was an improvement in Bengal-Sikkim trade both under exports and imports. It reveals that although trade with Tibet came to a standstill with the closure of the frontiers and many of the traders returned from Phari in despair.²⁷ Following this the Convention of 1893 relating to Trade, Communication and Pasturage was signed which allowed the British to set up a trading mart at Yatung on 1st May 1894. The Government of India decided to send trade agents/ officers to reside at Yatung to watch the conditions of the British trade and in the event of any trade dispute, the matter was to be resolved by the Political Officer in Sikkim and the Chine Frontier Officer.²⁸

IV

Although the Anglo Chinese Convention was signed in 1893 to conduct trade, there was a continuous string of resistance from the Tibetans in actual conduct of trade. It was only during the late half of the 1890's that the trade started showing some progress. The Political Officer of Sikkim in his diary of 16th January 1898 cites, "the trade for December are very good, amounting to Rs. 3, 41,290 this included a consignment of gold worth Rs. 16,800 the finest that had been sent in for some years".

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Conclusion

Although, the trade was disturbed periodically by the intermittent regional wars it continued to grow. The Eastern Himalayan trade further improved from 1875 onwards, as the British government began registering its trade in its trading *marts* (centers/depot). Commodities of exchange and its volume were large and lucrative for the British. Weekly *harts/hat* (weekly market for trade and exchanging of local commodities) was arranged all across the trading *marts* to encourage traders to commerce. Trade Agents were deployed on trading marts whose functions were not only commercial but political as well. To strengthen communication, trade routes especially overland routes with registering stations, bungalows or rest houses were established. The pre-existing routes were developed and new routes were also established. Roads were widened and metalled to accommodate traffic, making the flow of commodities without any hindrance. Thus, British colonialism heralded political intervention in the Eastern Himalayas shifting the commercial centre from Tibet to British Bengal. However, trade in this region continued and the commodities of the region found a larger global market. The present work is an attempt to examine the character of the Eastern Himalayan trade, its history and its development during the pre British and the extent and the nature of British colonial trade. It is also an attempt to highlight the commercial link between the kingdoms of Tibet, Sikkim and Bengal which were Buddhist Kingdoms and how religion and trade complimented each other in this trade network. This trade had been in existence since the ancient period and continued even when political dynamics underwent change under colonial occupation in these regions.

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