

POLICY BRIEF

Jan 8, 2020

Dr. Monika Chansoria is a Tokyo-based Senior Fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs. Previously, she has held appointments at the Sandia National Laboratories (U.S.), Hokkaido University (Sapporo, Japan), and Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris). Dr. Chansoria has authored five books including her latest work, *China, Japan, and Senkaku Islands: Conflict in the East China Sea Amid an American Shadow* (Routledge © 2018).

Initiating Tibet and English East India Company's Ties in the 18th Century: The Warren Hastings Years

Dr. Monika Chansoria

In the last quarter of the 18th century, Warren Hastings, the first *de facto* Governor General of India from 1774 to 1785 initiated and set up the English East India Company's relations with Tibet. The first contact in this reference was initiated by the Tibetans, when, upon hearing the news of the defeat of Bhutan's King Desi Shidariva¹ by the British forces in the battle for Cooch Behar (1772-1774), the Panchen Lama, Palden Yeshe, wrote a historic letter of mediation addressed to the Governor General.² Hastings seized the opportunity, and, in his response proposed a general treaty of amity and peace between Bengal and Tibet.

While Warren Hastings resisted the aggression of the Bhutanese, and drove them back from the plains of Bengal into their own mountains, but when, the Lama of Tibet interceded on their behalf, Hastings at once not only acceded, but went further, and made a deliberate effort to come into permanent relationship with both the Bhutanese and Tibetans.³ Bhutan had appealed to the Tashai Lama of Tibet to intercede for them with the Governor of Bengal. The Tashai Lama, who was then acting as Regent of Tibet during the infancy of the Dalai Lama, wrote to Warren Hastings a remarkable letter, which is quoted both by Turner and Markham.⁴ The letter is especially noteworthy since it reveals on record that the first communication between the British and the Tibetans was started by the latter. The Tibetans stated on many subsequent occasions to the Government

Disclaimer :

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of The Japan Institute of International Affairs or any other organization with which the author is affiliated.

1 A. Deb, *Bhutan and India: A Study in Frontier Political Relations, 1772-1865*, (Calcutta Publication, 1976), pp. 72-74.

2 Panchen Lama's Letter, received March 29, 1774, cited in, Arabinda Deb, *Tibet and Bengal: A Study in Trade Policy and Trade Pattern 1775-1875*, available at https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/id/636937/bot_1984_03_03.pdf

3 Sir Francis Younghusband, *India and Tibet: A History of Relations ... From the Time of Warren Hastings to 1910 with a particular account of the 1904 Mission to Lhasa*, (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1910).

4 Ibid.

of India, and on innumerable occasions to Francis Younghusband himself, that they were not 'permitted' to have communication with the British.⁵ In this reference, Tibet was closed more effectively by the Chinese since 1792 that dithered British Empire's North-East Frontier policy. Following are vital excerpts of the letter written by the Tashai Lama to Warren Hastings:

... Nor to persecute is my aim.... But in justice and humanity I am informed you far surpass ... I have been repeatedly informed that you have been engaged in hostilities against the Deb Judhur... I now take upon me to be his mediator, and to represent to you that, as the said Deb *Raja* is dependent upon the Dalai Lama ... from a regard to our religion and customs, I request you will cease all hostilities against the Deb *Raja*... in doing this you will confer the greatest favour and friendship upon me. I have reprimanded the Deb for his past conduct, and I have admonished him to desist from his evil practices in future, and to be submissive to you in all matters... I am persuaded that he will conform to the advice which I have given him, and it will be necessary that you treat him with compassion and clemency. As for my part, I am but a *Fakir*, and it is the custom of my sect, with the rosary in our hands, to pray for the welfare of mankind and for the peace and happiness of the inhabitants of this country.⁶

On receipt of this letter, Warren Hastings laid it before the Board at Calcutta, and informed them that, in reply, he had written to the Tashai

Lama, proposing a general treaty of amity and commerce between Bengal and Tibet.⁷ The letter of the Lama had invited the British to friendship, and the final arrangement of the disputes on the frontier had rendered the country accessible, without danger either to the persons or effects of travelers.⁸ Hastings therefore wrote for and obtained a passport for a European to proceed to Tibet for the negotiation of the treaty. And thus, Hastings nominated George Bogle as his envoy to proceed to Tibet for negotiation of a treaty and establishing commercial trade arrangements between the two countries. Bogle's mission was to set up a mutually equal communication of trade between the inhabitants of Bhutan (Bhote=Tibet) and Bengal.⁹

Hastings' chosen emissary in 1774, Bogle, was armed with instructions that brought to mind the maritime expeditions sponsored by the Courts of Spain, Portugal and England, to explore the unknown oceans of the world and bring back the products of the new lands discovered.¹⁰ Hastings instructed Bogle before the latter departed for Tibet that there were 'thousands of men in England' who would listen to the story of an expedition 'in search of knowledge' with 'ten times' the interest they would take in 'victories ... of the national enemies.'¹¹

Apart from the above, Hastings also sought information regarding the existential trade between Tibet and Siberia, Tibet and China, and, Kashmir and Tibet. This was partly because Hastings' eye scanned all the loose

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Deb, n. 2.

10 A. Mervyn Davies, *Strange Destiny: A Biography of Warren Hastings*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935) Chapter XXV, *Broad Horizons*, p. 346.

11 Keith Feiling, *Warren Hastings* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1954), Chapter IX, *Reform of the State: 1772-74*, p. 105.

scaffolding of British India. The overland route had great possibilities, he was keen to improve relations with Egypt, for which he presented a hookah and a gun to the Turkish governor.¹² Besides, there was the northern frontier on which skirmishes with the Bhutanese had introduced contacts with Tibet. Hastings wanted to know ‘what countries lie between Lhasa and Siberia,’ the trading routes between China and Kashmir, the course of the Brahmaputra, and a report in detail about the climate and roads. ‘Leave no means untried, but hazard neither your person nor your health.’¹³ Bogle, armed with a memorandum on the history, religion, and hierarchy of Tibet, ventured out, for what was the first ever British mission to Tibet and Bhutan (1774-1775) making it a novel exercise in commercial diplomacy.¹⁴ Bogle, accompanied by his wife, failed to reach Lhasa, but remained at Shigatze in 1774.

With his limited experience and reach in Tibet, he managed to record a graphic summary of the scope and pattern of Tibet’s trade with other countries.¹⁵ By the end of the year Bogle had seen the Tashai Lama, and sent in a report on the exports of musk and gold dust, on the Kalmucks whose camels brought Siberian furs, the Gurkhas who sent rice and iron, and the teas and porcelain from China.¹⁶ To that count, the Tibetans were known to have traded with the Chinese, the Mongols, and the Kalmuks in the north, and Bengal, Assam, Nepal, and Bhutan, which bordered Tibet in the south.¹⁷ Bogle noted that no duties were levied on goods and

trade was protected and free from exactions.¹⁸ This was a major reason for a large number of foreign merchants including the Kashmiris and Nepalese to settle in Tibet.

The policy of the Warren Hastings’ administration towards Bhutan and Tibet set forth a structural formalization of relationship that promised immense scope for furthering Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan trade, primarily by means of:

- a) the Anglo-Cooch Behar Treaty (1772)
- b) the Anglo-Bhutan Treaty (1774)
- c) George Bogle’s mission to Tibet
- d) Trade treaty with Bhutan (1775)

On being questioned upon his arrival in Calcutta from Tibet in 1786, merchant Purangir Gossain stated that “merchants had already found their way from Bengal to Tashilhumpo where the markets were being represented as being well supplied with English and Indian manufactures.”¹⁹ This flow of Indian and English goods to the markets of Tashilhumpo was the outcome of Bogle and Turner’s missions to Tibet.²⁰ During the Anglo-Gurkha war in 1815, David Scott (the Collector of Rangpur) sent Krishnakanta Bose to Bhutan to negotiate disputes between Cooch Behar and Bhutan. The report submitted by Bose was translated by David Scott into English, which, in part, confirmed the pattern of Tibet’s trade through Bhutan as given earlier by George Bogle besides furnishing new and crucial commercial

12 Ibid., Chapter X, *Northern India and the Rohilla War*, p. 121.

13 Ibid.

14 Deb, n. 2.

15 Ibid.

16 Feiling, n. 11.

17 Deb, n. 2.

18 Clements Markham, *The Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, (London 1876), p. 124.

19 Deb, n. 2, p. 23.

20 Ibid.

information.²¹ Bhutan’s foreign trade was carried on almost entirely with Tibet and Bengal. Bose underscored that almost the entire trade was monopolized by the officialdom in Bhutan, beginning with the *Dharma Raja*. Bose further noted, “The *Dharma Raja* trades with a capital of 25,000-30,000 rupees” besides drawing an annual income from the land to the south of the hills.²² The Paro Penlop and the chiefs of western Bhutan had monopoly interests in Tibet-Bengal trade through Bhutan and also in the inter-dooars trade.²³ Similarly, Tongsa Penlop (the eastern chief of Bhutan) had his trading interests spread across the Assam Dooars through Dewangiri. The chief of Thimpu “trades to a greater extent” than the Punakha chief and “feeds” the court for six months.²⁴

The Kashmiri merchants in Tibet could not make a dent in Bhutan to compensate for the losses which they sustained due to the Gurkha policy of exclusiveness in Nepal with respect to the Nepal-Tibet trade. Krishnakanta Bose furnished a list of Bhutan’s exchange trade items with Tibet, in which the exports to Tibet could be classified into the following four groupings:

- a) Rice, parched rice, wheat, and flours of *dhemsi*
- b) Woolen and cotton clothes
- c) Spices (nutmegs and cloves), indigo, sandal, red sandal, and asafetida
- d) Stones (both precious and semi-precious)

Excepting rice, the grouping of trade items was more or less similar from Bengal to Tibet via Nepal. Among Bhutan’s indigenous products

which became trade items were *tangan* horses (strong little poney used while carrying trade), blankets, walnuts, rock-salt (exported to Nepal and Assam), oranges and *munjeet* (madder).²⁵

Hastings’ Mission Dispatches to Tibet

The most noteworthy among all the missions that Hastings sponsored were the ones he dispatched to Tibet – a mystifying land above the mighty Himalayas that was unknown and closed to all contact with the West. Hastings envisioned breaking down the wall of seclusion and opening up Tibet for British India via its old trading routes into the heart of Asia.²⁶ Not only that, he simultaneously looked beyond Tibet towards China, and wrote:

Like the navigation of unknown seas, which are explored not for the attainment of any certain and prescribed object, but for the discovery of what they may contain; in so new and remote a search, we can only propose to adventure for possibilities. The attempt may be crowned with the most splendid and substantial success; or, it may terminate in the mere satisfaction of useless curiosity. But the hazard is small, the design is worthy of the pursuit of a rising state.²⁷

Hastings dispatches to Tibet illustrated his characteristic blend of intellectual curiosity and practical objectiveness.²⁸ Interestingly, the 1935 biographical portrayal of Hastings by A. Mervyn Davies narrates how the former suddenly awoke to the unpleasant realization that his retirement was in sight without him having accumulated any kind of fortune to meet with it. As per

21 Ibid.

22 For more details see, *Political Missions to Bhutan*, Bengal Secretariat, 1865/New Delhi 1972, p. 342.

23 Deb, n. 2, p. 23.

24 Ibid., p. 24.

25 Ibid., pp. 24-25.

26 Davies, n. 10, Chapter XXV, *Broad Horizons*, p. 346.

27 *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. XLI, Home Department, Imperial Record Office, Calcutta 1931, p. 120.

28 Davies, n. 10, Chapter XXV, *Broad Horizons*, p. 346.

his own statement, he was unable to draw his salary for a space of several months in 1783 and found himself in need of money. Consequently, he borrowed £30,000 from one of the leading native merchants of Calcutta, Nobkissen, who desired that Hastings accept the money as a gift – something that the latter declined and gave Nobkissen bonds for the said amount. Davies notes in the biography that the money, per se, was never paid back. In the beginning, Hastings decided to accept it as a gift to the East India Company, and thereafter, shortly before his retirement, wrote to the Company Directors seeking their permission to appropriate the sum to his own use to cover certain public expenses that he had incurred out of his own pocket. Although Hastings did not intend to charge it to their account at that point, however, found himself unable to bear later. The Company assented to his request. The ‘public expenses’ or ‘special enterprises’ being referred to were the missions to Tibet, the financing of the Pundits and the founding of the Madrassi College.²⁹ His decision drew staunch criticism even from his friends, leave aside foes, as they did not approve of the transaction. When this matter was debated in the House of Lords, Lord Thurlow admitted that it reflected discredit on Hastings, as a man with his position and salary, should never need to borrow money. Thurlow said, “... I think it is the weak part of his character.”³⁰

Notwithstanding the above controversy regarding finances, Hastings realized that it was too late for him to have begun paying heed to the state of his private fortune. The decision and execution of dispatching multiple missions to Tibet perhaps topped the list of public enterprises that Hastings financed out of his own pocket. This was followed by the compilations of

law made by the Pundits and Muslim Professors, and establishment of a Muslim seminary.³¹ Most of his grand plans and enterprises came to fruition in the fullness of time when their memory had nearly been forgotten. Tibet, Egypt, and Delhi, were instances. In 1805 the British, led by Warren Hastings’ successor, Marquess Wellesley, occupied Delhi and became custodians of its King as well as inheritors of its imperial grandeur and traditions exactly as Hastings had intended. However, the proposal was received with cold derision by Hastings’ Council in 1784 which declared it contrary to the Company’s orders and far too dangerous – thereby making them emphatically veto it.³²

Aiming on friendly missions for developing trade and diplomatic relations, and along the coasts to sound the waters and map the harbors and rivers, Warren Hastings sent forth his officers to explore and survey the north, east and west to Tibet, the Red Sea, Cochin China, and the interior of the continent. He put road-makers to work and organized a regular service of posts along the main routes from Calcutta, northward to Patna and eastward to Dacca. Among those who served under him was Major Rennell, who was appointed Surveyor-General of Bengal in 1764. Rennell’s impressive *Bengal Atlas* earned him the distinction of being known as “the father of Indian geography” bearing the date 1781.³³

Hastings tasked George Bogle with the following mission-related objectives and responsibilities:

- 1) Bogle was to send Hastings, one or more pairs of animals called *foos* which produce the shawl wool. If by a *dooly*, cage, or any

29 Ibid., Chapter XIX, *More Material for the Prosecution*, p. 271.

30 Debates of the House of Lords on the Evidence Delivered in the Trial of Warren Hastings, (London: Printed for J. Debrett, Vernor and Hood, 1796).

31 Davies, n. 10, Chapter XXIV, *The Last Year*, p. 320.

32 Ibid., p. 325.

33 Ibid., Chapter XXV, *Broad Horizons*, p. 346.

other contrivance, they can be secured from the fatigue or hazard of the way, the expense is to be no objection.

- 2) To send one or more pairs of cattle which bear what are called cow tails.
- 3) To send Hastings, carefully packed fresh ripe walnuts for seed, or an entire plant, if it can be transported; and any other curious or valuable seeds or plants, the *rhubarb* and *ginseng* especially.
- 4) Any natural produce, manufactures, paintings, or whatever else may be acceptable to persons of taste in England. Animals only that may be useful.
- 5) Bogle was to make inquiries concerning the people, the form of their government, and the mode of collecting revenues...
- 6) Hastings, in particular, wanted Bogle to maintain a diary, inserting whatever passed his observation that shall be characteristic of the people, their manners, customs, buildings, cookery, the country, climate, roads ... primarily minuting every fact or remark as it occurred, and putting it in order while they remained fresh in memory.
- 7) To inquire what countries lies between Lhasa and Siberia, and what communication there was between them. The same with regard to China and *Cashmere*.
- 8) To ascertain the value of Tibet's trade with Bengal by the gold and silver coins and send samples of both to Hastings.
- 9) Every nation excels others in one particular art or science. Bogle was tasked with finding out the excellence of the Bootans (Tibetans).
- 10) To inform the course and navigation of the Burramputra (Brahmaputra) and of the state of the countries through which it ran.³⁴

Additionally, a letter that Hastings wrote to Bogle while he was engaged on the Tibet mission was characteristic:

I feel myself more interested in the success of your mission than in reason perhaps I ought to be; but there are thousands of men in England whose good-will is worth seeking, and who will listen to the story of such enterprises in search of knowledge with ten times more avidity than they would read accounts that brought crores to the national credit, or descriptions of victories that slaughtered thousands of the national enemies. Go on and prosper. Your journal has traveled as much as you, and is confessed to contain more matter than Hawkesworth's three volumes. Remember that everything you see is of importance. I have found out a better road to Lhasa, by the way of Deggerchen and Coolhee. If I can find it I will send it to you. Be not an economist if you can bring home splendid vouchers of the land which you have visited.³⁵

Subsequently, Bogle was received at Lhasa where he established cordial relations with the Tashai Lama, who, in turn, used his influence with the Emperor of China to interest him in the idea of opening up trade and diplomatic relations with the Bengal Government. Around seven years later in 1781, Hastings, freed at last from the worst of the difficulties that had been impeding him in the intervening years, sought to follow up this promising beginning and sent a second mission for which, he chose a young kinsman named Captain Samuel Turner.³⁶ Turner stayed in Tibet for two years, although not necessarily in Lhasa. By the time Turner reached Tibet, it was too late, for Turner found out that the Lama had died and so did the project. The chief fruit of Turner's visit was a report of his interview with the

34 G. R. Gleig, *Memoirs of Warren Hastings* 1841, vol. I, p. 413.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 415.

36 Davies, n. 10, Chapter XXV, *Broad Horizons*, pp. 346-347.

new Lama, who, though only an infant in arms seemed phenomenally precocious. The report set Hastings wondering whether there might be some truth in the Tibetan superstition that each successive chosen Lama was, in fact, a reincarnation of his predecessor. Deciding to term it a “physical curiosity” Hastings wrote to Lord Mansfield, “... it is perhaps the first example which was ever produced to the Western world of the effect of education on an infant mind.”³⁷

British India did not send more such commissioners thereafter. Ekai Kawaguchi, Japan’s first successful explorer inside Tibet in 1900, referred to Bogle’s account of his journey being extant in print, while noting that the only English explorer to have reached Lhasa in 1811 from India was Thomas Manning. Around the same time, trade between British India and Tibet had actively grown, but, with the termination of Hastings’ viceroyalty and subsequent return to England, it began to register a steep decline, and ultimately ceased altogether. All channels of communications had since become almost closed between the two countries.

End of Hastings’ Tenure and That of British India’s Tibetan Connect

The end of Hastings tenure as Governor-General also marked the end of British India’s Tibetan adventure for over 100 years since none of Hastings’ successors could follow his lead, and his enterprise. When Francis Edward Rawdon-Hastings (the 1st Marquess of Hastings/ Lord Moira) became the Governor-General, he was urged by Warren Hastings to continue maintaining the Tibet connect – not so much for political reasons or for trade, but more out of curiosity, and the desire for knowledge should

that be a legitimate pursuit of Government.³⁸ However, Lord Moira did not take the advice and for more than a century, Tibet and its frontiers were completely forgotten and ignored.³⁹

In 1838 R. B. Pemberton led the next British mission to Bhutan in the context of a series of territorial disputes in the Dooars of Bengal and Assam. In his report, Pemberton noted the imperfect nature of materials available in Tibetan trade. Quoting from *Hakluyt’s Voyages* about the travels of Ralph Fitch, the English merchant to Cooch Bihar in 1583, Pemberton commented that the trade between Tibet and Bengal was “almost exactly as it exists at the present day.” It would appear from the small table of exports and imports given of the Rangpur-Bhutan trade that in Pemberton’s time, the trade was in a depressed condition.⁴⁰ Quoting from his words, “... the whole foreign trade of Bootan which is almost entirely confined to Thibet on the one side, and, Bengal and Assam on the other, can hardly amount to 50,000 rupees per annum... at one time it was estimated at 200,000 for Assam alone, and there is little hope either of any relaxation in the jealous restrictions now imposed upon it, or, of the admission of our merchants to Bootan and Thibet as long as the Chinese policy and influence reigns supreme.”⁴¹

It was only in 1903, during the administration of Lord George Curzon (who was appointed the Viceroy of India in January 1899) that a fresh attempt was made to establish relations with Tibet and its people – the result of which was far different from the journeys made by Bogle and Turner. Whereas Hastings missions were peaceful one-man missions, Curzon opted to send a military expedition, under the leadership of Francis Younghusband who felt that “If Warren Hastings’ policy had been followed up,

37 Gleig, n. 34, vol. III, p. 161.

38 Additional Manuscripts on Hastings.

39 Davies, n. 10, Chapter XXV, *Broad Horizons*, p. 348.

40 Deb, n. 2, p. 25.

41 For details see, *Political Missions to Bhutan*, Bengal Secretariat, 1865/New Delhi 1972, p. 230.

we would gradually have created a neighborly feeling with the Tibetans, drawing them bit by bit closer to us.” Instead Younghusband discovered upon reaching the frontier of Tibet that the British were held in no esteem, with little known of their power and empire. Instead of being welcomed as friends, the Younghusband mission was received as the enemy and had to fight its way in. Younghusband further stated:

... all this need never have been if we had followed Warren Hastings’ example and continued to send agents into Tibet to keep the Tibetans in touch with us and accustomed to look on us as friends ... the best example both of the folly of inertness and of the good that comes from running risks for an adequate object.⁴²

The testimony by Younghusband reinforced considerably that Hastings’ thought and vision spanned with ease the gap that lay between the Empire of 1784 and 1858.⁴³ Many have argued that it is the case of a lost horizon in history that this structure was not nurtured for a century. Resultantly, the cost to the British-Indian treasury was a war against Bhutan (1864-65) and later, a military mission against Tibet (1904).⁴⁴

Another biography on Hastings penned in 1954 by Keith Feiling, almost two decades following the work published by Mervyn Davies, stated that Warren Hastings’ life was three-dimensional including the State he served, his personal life, and a third arena, wherein the first two dimensions met and overlapped. Hastings’ own papers spanning 300 volumes have left much that seems untold. The fully documented account of his manifold policies included

revenue and land tenure, diplomatic relations ranging from Egypt to Tibet, and, from the Sikh confederacy to Pondicherry, military campaigns over vast theatres including conducting a little frontier war against the Bhutanese, whom he described as a primitive enemy ‘much more sincere, liberal, and polite’ than expected.⁴⁵

Warren Hastings’ policy was not to sit still within his borders. Younghusband states in his own memoir that Hastings intended respecting not merely the independence but also the isolation of his neighbors.⁴⁶ It was a forward policy that combined alertness and deliberation, rapidity and persistency, assertiveness and receptivity. He sought to secure his borders by at once striking when danger threatened, but also by taking infinite pains over long periods of time to promote ordinary neighborly communication with those on the other side.⁴⁷ In reference to Tibet particularly, Hastings’ biographers, and others including Younghusband, credit Hastings for his persistence, infinite tact, sagacity, and work for neighborly relationship⁴⁸ – which thereby rendered him a cut above all other Governors-General of British India.

42 Sir Francis Younghusband, *The Light of Experience: A Review of some Men and Events of my Time* 1927, p. 110.

43 Davies, n. 10, Chapter XXIV, *The Last Year*, p. 325.

44 Deb, n. 2, p. 22.

45 Feiling, n. 11, p. vii.

46 For more details see, Younghusband, n. 3.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.