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## **Colonial aspiration of tea trade in the Trans Himalaya: A study of the prospect of Darjeeling tea trade in Tibet (1860-1900) Topgyal Zimba**

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### **Abstract**

*The commercialization of Agriculture that characterized the Indian economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century did not leave far flung area as Darjeeling unaffected as an outcome Darjeeling became specialized in Tea production. Through the accounts of Western travellers in Tibet, British had learned that Tibetan were fond of tea; it was much in demand in Tibet and the Chinese used to cater to their demand. The close proximity of Tibet from the tea producing Darjeeling hills coupled with the knowledge of favourable trade potential with Tibet instigated the Colonial Government to nourished high aims of selling tea across the Himalayas, but ironically instead of selling tea to Tibet, Colonial India found itself importing tea from Tibet into Darjeeling. It is in this context that my article attempts to understand the prospect of Darjeeling Tea in the Trans Himalayan trade, it aims to reconstruct the attempts of colonial Government to promote Darjeeling tea in Tibet, discusses the nature of Tibetan tea and subsequent failure to woo Tibetans who instead preferred tea from China.*

**Keyword: Brick Tea, Colonial economy, Darjeeling Tea, Tea trade, Trans Himalaya.**

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**Introduction:** The colonial hill station of Darjeeling was acquired from Sikkim in 1835, soon after in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century Darjeeling hill plunged into a commercial career with the growth of Plantation economy in the hills. The strategic location of Darjeeling being close to Himalayan states also made this hill commercially and politically significant area in the Eastern Himalayan region. The credit for the introduction of Tea in Darjeeling goes to Dr A. Campbell, Superintendent of Darjeeling, who conducted a successful experimental growth of Tea in Darjeeling in 1841. It was he who first conceptualized the trade of Darjeeling tea with Tibet.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently in 1856 first commercial Tea Industry was established in Darjeeling. Unlike the Tea of Assam which had

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<sup>1</sup> Lamb, A. (1960). *Britain and the Chinese Central Asia The Road to Lasha*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.p.123.

indigenous variety of Tea, the Darjeeling Tea was completely of a Chinese species,<sup>2</sup> smuggled from China through Kumaoun.<sup>3</sup> Earlier accounts of George Bogle had shed light on the Tibetan fondness for tea,<sup>4</sup> and since the tea production made a steady development in the Darjeeling Hills as a consequence the British Government nurtured aims of selling Darjeeling teas to Tibet and also Sikkim and Bhutan where tea was imported from Tibet. Such aims of Colonial administrator existed not only for Darjeeling tea but also for the Assam tea. In Assam, Tezpur was conceptualised as potential trading hub for supplying tea to Tibet existed.<sup>5</sup> The British had high hopes of exchanging tea with the Tibetan Gold.<sup>6</sup> The Reports of H.C Wake, the Superintendent of Darjeeling on the Trans frontier trade of Darjeeling produced in 1864 showed a steady growth in trade with Tibet<sup>7</sup> as such Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, following the views earlier envisaged by Campbell, saw the trade with Tibet would have them the opportunity to export the Darjeeling Tea to Tibet. The Bengal Government visualised that, if the articles of the descriptive requirement would be procurable at the reasonable rates, then the Darjeeling would turn into the supplier of Tea to Tibet, the nation where Tea was considered a 'national food.'<sup>8</sup> This aspiration of Colonial administrators later precipitated into an effort to sell Darjeeling tea to Tibet by adjusting to the need and taste of Tibetan. There were basically two obstructions that Colonial India had to face: Firstly the ban on the import of Indian Tea by the Tibetan authorities and Secondly, proclivity of Tibetans towards the Chinese brick tea instead of the fine Darjeeling tea.

**Chinese Brick Tea:** Tea was widely consumed by the Tibetans but it was not produced in Tibet but in China from where it was imported. This was a special kind of tea shaped in the form of brick and hence the name Brick tea. The plantation as well as the manufacturing process of this brick tea differed from the Darjeeling Tea. Ya Tzow in the Sechuan province of Western China was the source of tea plantation but the main tea trading centre was Tachienlu located 200 miles away from Ya Tzow. The tea produced in Sechuan province of

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<sup>2</sup> Koehler, Jeff. (2015). *Darjeeling A History of World Greatest Tea*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury.p.69.

<sup>3</sup> *Newman's Guide to Darjeeling*. (1900) Calcutta: W Newman and Co.p.46.

<sup>4</sup> Nagendra Singh remarks that one of the reasons for the plantation of Tea in Bengal and Assam was to export tea to Tibet.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper, TT. (1873) *Meshmee Hill An account of Journey made in the attempt to penetrate Thibet from Assam to open new routes for Commerce*. London: Henry S King and Co.p.53.

<sup>6</sup> Arora, V. *Routing the commodities of Empire through Sikkim*. (July 2008). *Commodities of Empire* working paper no 9. Milton Keynes.p.2-18.

<sup>7</sup> Darjeeling - Tibet was exclusively conducted by the Tibetan traders as until 1904 Tibet followed a closed door policy.

<sup>8</sup> Letters from A. Eden, Secretary to the Govt of Bengal to the Secretary of the Govt of India dated 7th July 1864 (West Bengal State Archive).

China was made exclusively for sale in Tibet.<sup>9</sup> It was sold in large quantities and at high profit.<sup>10</sup> The tea trade was very important to China as it fetched high custom duties besides providing employments to thousand peoples engaged in manufacture and portorage of tea. Unlike the tea plants cultivated in Darjeeling the tea Plants cultivated in Ya Tzow was left untrimmed as such it was quite tall and often attained height of 15 ft from the ground. The Chinese brick tea was packed in baskets which weighted up to 20 pounds. Brick tea fetched price according to its quality and it was transported by means of manual labour and Yaks. T.T Cooper estimated that annually 6 million pounds of Brick Tea was exported to Tibet during 1860's and by 1890's W.W. Rockhill estimates an export of 10 to 13 million pound of brick tea to Tibet, besides this a good number of tea was also smuggled.

Accounts of Travellers who visited Tibet like T.T Cooper, Father Desgoding, Sarat Chandra, W.W. Rockhill etc throws light about different qualities and prices of Brick tea. In this regards I quote the words of Sarat Chandra Das, who visited Tibet twice in 1879 and 1881, he writes, 'In Lhasa the price of tea was eight *annas* a pound in the 19th century which was in the form of brick. The price for five pounds of brick tea was three rupees and was of two different qualities namely, *chupa* and *gyepa*. The value of *chupa* tea was twelve *annas* a pound and the value of *gyepa* tea was about nine and half *annas* a pound. However, the brick tea sold in Lhasa called *du tang-nyipa* was regarded as the best quality and it was priced at ten rupees for a brick of six pounds.'<sup>11</sup> Different qualities of Brick Tea according to T.T. Cooper were packed according to their grade.

**Smuggling of Darjeeling Tea:** Tea trade in Tibet was an exclusive monopoly of the Tibetan Monks so in order to secure their trading privileges; they had put an embargo on the importation of Indian tea in Tibet. Even the Nepalese traders<sup>12</sup> of Kathmandu who were also active in conducting trade between Tibet and India were not allowed to trade in Indian tea in Tibet.<sup>13</sup> Under these circumstances an early attempts were made to smuggle Indian tea into Tibet in the year 1872. Tibetan trader from Darjeeling named Rabden tried to smuggle

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<sup>9</sup> Rostgorn, A. De. (1895) *On the Tea Cultivation in Western Ssuchuan and the tea trade with Tibet v.i.a. Tachienlu*. London: Luzac and Co. p.36.

<sup>10</sup> Grenard, F. (1904). *Tibet the country and its inhabitants*. London: Hutichon and Co.p.293.

<sup>11</sup> Das, S.C. (1902). (2nd edition). *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* .London: John Murray Albe Marle Street.p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> Newar community was active in trans Himalayan trade, they even had shops in Lasha for details about Nepalese privileges in Tibet see Bell, C. (reprint 2000) *Tibet Past and Present* ., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publisher.p.278-280. Appendix iv.

<sup>13</sup> Sen J. 1971 India's Trade with Nepal v.i.a. Central Asia, Bulletin of Tibetology Vol VIII No 2, Gantok: 28-30.

Darjeeling tea into Tibet but unfortunately he was detected at Phari, so his teas was confiscated and he was imprisoned for three years by the Tibetan authority.<sup>14</sup>

**Edgar's Opinion on the Tea Trade:** The Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling<sup>15</sup> J.W. Edgar while on his visit to the Sikkim- Tibetan frontier in 1873 took opportunity to give Darjeeling tea to the Pahari<sup>16</sup> *Jungpen*<sup>17</sup> as a gesture of his hospitality as well as to know the Tibetan opinion on the taste of Darjeeling tea. The official of Tibet acknowledged that Darjeeling tea was superior to the imported China brick tea except the one that was sent to Dalai Lama by the Chinese Emperor from time to time. From the Tibetan Frontier official he learned that the embargo on the Indian Tea was clamped down by the Chinese *Ambans*.<sup>18</sup> Edgar was of the opinion that this part of the Chinese policy was not popular with the general Tibetans. Seeing the prospect of Darjeeling tea in Tibet, Edgar reports, 'I have no doubt that if that if the tea was freely admitted to Tibet, our Darjeeling growers could easily produce a tea of better quality than that now commonly consumed and deliver it even at Lasha at a lower price than is now paid for the China article. But they have to manufacture for the market, and break away from ideas formed under the influence of brokers catering for English taste.'<sup>19</sup> He attributed to the wrong policy of the Darjeeling Tea Planters for not being able to sell Tea in Tibet.

**Fyzabad Conference:** The Fyzabad Conference of 1880 discussed subjects related with Indo-Tibetan trade through Nepal. Along with the effect of Nepalese transit duties on the India's trade to Tibet, the question of supplying Indian tea for Central Asia was also stressed in the conference. Decision was reached to procure samples of Tibetan brick tea "with a view to ascertaining the practicability of manufacturing similar quantities." Accordingly the decision was also made to procure specimens of the tea in general demand in the Tibetan provinces of U, Tsang and Kham "with a view of enabling the tea-gardens in British India to manufacture tea in accordance with the taste of the Tibetans."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Macaulay, Colman. (1885) *Report of a Mission to Sikkim and the Tibet Frontier*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.p.87.

<sup>15</sup> Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling besides looking after the administration of Darjeeling also had the responsibility to look after the diplomatic relation with Sikkim prior to the creation of the post of Political officer of Sikkim which was created after the Sikkim Convention of 1890.

<sup>16</sup> Phari was a frontier town in Chumbi valley where custom tax was levied by the Tibetan on the British goods.

<sup>17</sup> Jungpens were the Tibetan district officer.

<sup>18</sup> Edgar, J.W. (1874). *Report on a visit to Sikkim and Thibetan Frontier*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.p.25.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid: 46; Ambans was the Chinese resident in Tibet.

<sup>20</sup> Sen, J. (1971). *India's Trade with Central Asia v.i.a. Nepal*. Gantok: Bulletin of Tibetology Vol VIII No 2.28-30.

**Macaulay's Opinion on the Tea Trade:** A similar visit like Edgar to the Sikkim-Tibetan frontier was made by Colman Macaulay the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling in 1884. In his report Macaulay calculated the cost of export of Darjeeling tea to Tibet and deduced that the Darjeeling tea could reach Lasha even at a cheaper rate than Brick tea of China even if the Tibetan authorities imposed huge custom taxes equivalent to that levied by China on the Brick tea. At Sighatze and Gyantse, in his calculation, the cost of Darjeeling Tea would have been even less while that of the China tea would have been greater as this place was closer to Darjeeling. Macaulay even recommended for the use of gunny bag for tea package for export to Tibet, instead of the usual expensive wooden box which was used for English market but he also writes that, 'even if boxes were used they would be used in Tibet where wood was valued, half an *anna* would be an outside limit for packaging.'<sup>21</sup>

**Preparation of Darjeeling Brick Tea:** Even though the Tibetan border was strictly guarded against the Indian tea but this measure could not prevent the colonial aspiration to stop searching for new market for tea in Tibet. In order to gain a wide currency for the programme of exporting tea to Tibet, pamphlets were written and widely circulated in Darjeeling for the promotion of tea trade with Tibet.<sup>22</sup> An ingenious measure was taken to encourage all the Tea planters of Darjeeling to make tea as per the taste of the Tibetans. As a consequence the some Tea Planters of Darjeeling started to make effort from 1880's to displace Chinese Brick tea used by Tibetans by Brick tea made in India. Experiment began to be started on Brick Tea by the Tea Planters of Darjeeling; the idea was to produce Brick Tea in Darjeeling in line with Chinese Brick Tea in a hope that such measure would woo the Tibetans. The experimental manufacturing of brick tea in Darjeeling received much guidance from the local French missionary Father Desgodin,<sup>23</sup> who lived in Pedong after spending twenty two years in Tibet. Under the direction of Bengal Government Father Desgodin had written a pamphlet where minute description for the process and preparation of brick tea adopted in China was described. His pamphlet on Brick Tea provided much insight for the preparation of the Brick tea in India. Such measure was taken with an intention of not only selling Darjeeling tea to the Tibetans of Tibet but also the Tibetan of Darjeeling who were locally called Bhutias.

In the year 1883-1884, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling received samples of brick tea manufactured by Messrs Cresswell Company and he was directed by the Bengal government to facilitate its sale in those market of Darjeeling districts which was most frequented by the Tibetan Traders.<sup>24</sup> So, an allotment of Rs 100 was sanctioned for the

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<sup>21</sup> Macaulay, Colman. (1885) *Report of a Mission to Sikkim and the Tibet Frontier*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.p.88-90.

<sup>22</sup> Report of the External Trade in Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan 1884-1885: 19-25.

<sup>23</sup> Louis, J.A.H. (1894) *The Gates of Thibet*. Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press.p.10.

<sup>24</sup> Report on the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan 1883-1884: 20 -23.

purpose of paying commission to the shop keepers who were entrusted with the sale of tea manufactured by the Messrs Cress Well Company of Darjeeling for trading purpose but its result was not satisfactory.<sup>25</sup> Later when the Kalimpong *mela*<sup>26</sup> was started the Tea planters also used this platform to showcase their tea for promotion and a competition was held where the best tea used to receive the prize.<sup>27</sup>

**Failure of Darjeeling Brick Tea:** J.A.H. Louis who witnessed the brick tea experimentation in Darjeeling during 1890's remarks that 'subject of brick tea is receiving attention.' He further says that 'it is astonishing that, with the Tibet market at our door, and the fact that a considerable quantity of this article is imported from China through Tibet and meets with a ready sale in the Darjeeling district, in Sikkim and in British Bhutan, at ten and half *anna* per pound and upward, we have not succeeded in producing, from our own tea bushes, an article to compete with this (Brick tea) commodity of Chinese manufacture.' The Tibetans all over the Himalayas were so accustomed to the Chinese brick tea that even the Bhutias (Tibetans) of Darjeeling used to drink the costly Chinese brick tea brought by the Tibetan traders. The British Political officer of Kalimpong C.A Bell writes, 'Even in Darjeeling, with the far-famed tea of that name at their very doors, the Tibetan population prefer the Chinese tea that has come to them so painfully across their native mountains. It costs more, and they are poor, but they must have it.'<sup>28</sup> This was the case not only with Darjeeling but also other Bhutia inhabited region of India like Ladakh, the Brick tea was so popular in Ladakh that it could not replace Kangra Tea.<sup>29</sup> Although the brick tea was supplied by the Tibetan traders in a few quantity given the small size of the Bhutia population but still it was significant as the local natives discarded even the Darjeeling brick tea for Chinese brick tea.

The failure of the Darjeeling Tea to win the taste and demand of Tibetans lies in the factors for the Tibetans to favour Chinese Brick tea. The tea trade between China and Tibet had begun since 1074 A.D,<sup>30</sup> since then the Tibetan had been used to the Chinese brick tea. Although the bulk of material for brick tea was made up of *lao-ken* which a composite mixture of tea plant's stem, branches and coarse leaves admixed with twigs and branches of other tree and shrubs,<sup>31</sup> it found its taste among the Tibetans. While the Chinese Brick tea

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<sup>25</sup> Report on the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan 1884-1885: 19-25.

<sup>26</sup> Kalimpong mela was the biggest fair in Darjeeling hills and it used to attract traders from the trans frontier countries.

<sup>27</sup> Louis, J.A.H. (1894) *The Gates of Thibet*. Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press.p.5.

<sup>28</sup> Bell, C. (1928) *The People of Tibet*. London: Oxford University Press.p.236.

<sup>29</sup> Gill B,G. (Winter 2000). *India's Trade With Tibet: Early British Attempts*. The Tibet Journal. Vol. 25, No. 4.p.78-82.

<sup>30</sup> Rostgorn A. De, On the Tea Cultivation in Western Ssuchuan and the tea trade with Tibet v.i.a. Tachienlu, 1895, Luzac and Co, London: 13

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: 25

was not considered delectable by the Western travellers and Colonial administrators likewise Darjeeling tea was considered insipid by the Bhutias, the local tea did not catered to the traditional taste of the Tibetans, they considered Darjeeling Tea tasted too bitter and as such their impression was that if Darjeeling tea were not fired it would be more of their taste.<sup>32</sup> Tibetans were of the opinion that the Chinese tea was more nutritious, more wholesome, and more pleasant to the taste.<sup>33</sup> Sarat Chandra Das gives a slight different view with regards to the Tibetans favouring the Brick Tea, he said that, 'In comparison with the price of the Tibetan Brick Tea, the Darjeeling tea was cheaper however, reason for the Tibetan to prefer Chinese Brick Tea was due to the convenience of storage as the Tibetan tea was in the form of bricks and the other reason was that the Tibetan tea was lighter as compared to strong and loose tea of Darjeeling.'<sup>34</sup> Brick Tea was not only traditional beverage for the Tibetans but it was also their food.<sup>35</sup> It was eaten along with butter and *tsampa*. Besides this the Brick tea in Tibet was used as a medium of exchange, it was an intrinsic part of their traditional economy. Although monetary system was in vogue in Tibet but it was in a rudimentary nature, their coinage system dated back only to 18<sup>th</sup> century previously they had mint in Nepal.<sup>36</sup> Chinese and Indian currency was also used by the Tibetans;<sup>37</sup> they had only one type of coin called *tranka*.<sup>38</sup> But owing to the backwardness of their technology Rockwell says, that 'the people could not test the purity of Tibetan *tranka*'. So, although the monetary system was limited, on the contrary much part of Tibet widely used barter system<sup>39</sup> as such brick tea became was very important to the Tibetans. Therefore all the above factor caused the Tibetans to prefer Chinese Brick tea.

**Conclusion:** Following a boundary dispute with Tibet in 1888 the Sikkim expedition was sent after which Sikkim Tibet Convention was signed in 1890 and Trade regulation treaty in 1893. On both the case Sikkim was represented by India and Tibet was represented by China. With regards to the question of Indian tea, Trade Regulation Treaty allowed the entry of Indian tea in Tibet after five year of signing the treaty. As per the Article IV of the Trade Regulation Treaty, 'Indian Tea may be imported into Tibet at a rate of duty not

<sup>32</sup> Report on the External Trade in Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan 1884-1885.p.19-25.

<sup>33</sup> Bell, C. (1928) *The People of Tibet*. London: Oxford University Press.p 122-123.

<sup>34</sup> Das, S.C. (1902). (2nd edition). *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* .London: John Murray Albe Marle Street.p.122.

<sup>35</sup> Rockhill W.W. (1895) *Notes on the Ethnology of Tibet*. Washington: Government Printing House.p.704-705.

<sup>36</sup> First Nepal Tibet war was waged on the issue of the monetary problem, Tibet used to supply Nepal bullion and in return Nepal minted it, for more details see Regmi, D.R. (reprint2007.) *Modern Nepal vol I and ii*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication.p.425-510.

<sup>37</sup> Waddell, L.A. (1905). *Lasha and its Mysteries*. London: John Murray.p.253.

<sup>38</sup> Tranka was a Tibetan silver coin.

<sup>39</sup> Rockhill W.W 1895 Notes on the Ethnology of Tibet, Government Printing House, Washington: 719.

exceeding that at which Chinese tea is imported into England, but trade in Indian tea shall not be engaged in during the five years for which other commodities are exempt.' But even after the completion of five years of signing treaty, embargo on Indian tea was not lifted by Tibet as such no Darjeeling tea could entered Tibet during the course of 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The traditional affinity of the Tibetan with the Chinese Brick was such that even after the opening of Tibet in 1904 Indian Tea could not make headway in Tibet as had been expected.

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