

Nomadic Business Through High Passes to Tibet From Uttarakhand and Nepal

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There is no doubt that Bhotiyas and Tibetans knew each other from ancient time, as these nomads passed while grazing their animals in the high mountainous region. The Tibet border trade was in vogue even in the third century BC. Edwin T. Atkinson in his gazetteer has mentioned that there was an ancient route from Patliputra to Taxila via Kalsi. According to the historian, borax for the use of goldsmiths of northern India was imported from Tibet in the 6th century AD. Borax was used in making ink to write on birch bark or locally made hand paper. Pearls, corals and glass beads were exported to Tibet in exchange for borax import in those days.¹ The British were fully convinced that it was only through these passes to Tibet from the Kumaon and Garhwal regions that they could keep an eye on advancing Russians. They decided to develop the trade with Tibet via these passes and sent Francis Young Husband with five other officers and 100 troops to Tibet in 1903 to facilitate mobility of Indian traders to the neighbouring country for the trade. "Even a survey was done for laying a railway line from Pilibhit to Tanakpur that was to be further connected with the Lipulekh pass via a road².

The border trade with Tibet through high Himalayan valleys in Uttarakhand used to commence through the Byans, Chaundas, Garbyang, Darma and Johar passes in Pithoragarh district and the Niti pass and Mana pass in Chamoli district. "The significant passes of Lipulekh (16,500 ft), Darma (18,550 ft), Limpia (18,150 ft), Kungri Bingri (18,300 ft), Unta Dhura (17,950 ft), Mana (17,590 ft) and Niti (16,600 ft) were used for the trade with Tibet. The British in the Kumaon region became aware of the traditional trade between people living in Indian border villages and those in Tibet through several high Himalayan passes after a Jesuit missionary, **Father Antonio de Andrade**, visited the Tibetan mart of **Tsaprang** through the Niti pass in Garhwal in 1624. Father Andrade mentioned that the Niti and Mana passes were well-

¹ According to Dr. Lalit Pant, Researcher on the border trade

² According to Dr. Lalit Pant, Researcher on the border trade

known trade routes to Tibet in those days. Another British settlement officer of Garhwal in 1896 also mentioned that the trade with Tibet was an important source of income and local employment in the border districts of the Kumaon and Garhwal regions in those days. According to him, the trade also provided a market for local produce of the region as well. The British, considering the significance of the border trade, later secured the easiest way to Tibet through these regions so that the trade could prosper.

The British in the early nineteenth century were fully convinced that the trade with Tibet sustained agriculture, animal husbandry, cottage and pharmacology industry in the lower valleys of Kumaon and Garhwal and generated employment for thousands of people. He adds cereals and grains of coarse varieties were the main exports to Tibet while salt, borax, wool, valuable stones and herbs were the main imports before the trade closed in 1962 following the war with China. “**Charles W. Sherring**, the British commissioner in 1906, has mentioned that a trade worth 67,000 British pounds was commissioned from the Kumaon region alone”. Goods worth Rs 86,000, including raw wool Pasham, yak tail, sheep and goats and borax, were imported from Tibet in the first year of the resumption of the trade in 1992 while Indian traders exported Rs 12.06 lakh worth of textile, coffee, vegetables, jaggery, mishri (sugar candy) and Phaphar flour to Tibet, says HC Semwal, District Magistrate, Pithoragarh.³

Tea sipping, broken stone pieces matter of mutual trust: The traditional trade between Indian traders and their counterparts in Tibet was done on the basis of the ‘**Gamgya**’ system that was based on mutual faith. The system was established when the traders from both countries met during a small ceremony called ‘**Suljimulji**’ where a small cup of tea or wine was brought in. The first sip of tea or wine was taken by a Tibetan trader called ‘**Mushye**’ while the Indian trader called ‘**Mitra**’ had the second sip. After the tea-sipping ceremony, a few precious gifts were exchanged between the two. Later, an ordinary stone was broken into two parts. While the Tibetan trader kept the one part of the broken stone, the other part remained with his Indian partner. Dr. Pant says in later years, the representatives of the two traders or their generations were recognised by these stone parts. If the two parts fitted well, the identity of the representatives was established and the two would begin trading with each other. The trading on

³ Dr. R.S. Tolia, former Chief Secretary from Johar Valley in Pithoragarh District.

the basis of this system between tribal Sauka and Rang traders and their counterparts in Tibet continued for centuries till 1962.

According to Dr. Pant, *The 'De-Mushye'⁴ traders in Tibet, Dokpa nomads were the other important participants in the trade before 1962. The Dokpa nomads lived in the interior parts of Tibet with their herds of animals and visited the Taklakot mart for the trade. "These Dokpas used to exchange their raw material, including wool, with grains brought by Indian traders during the trading season. As the Dokpa traders would come with herds of animals, they were not allowed entry into the Indian mart at Gunji. A mart was set up at Gunji in the Indian side after the trade resumed in 1992."* **H.C. Semwal**, District Magistrate, Pithoragarh, says "the activities for the border trade begin in May when trade passes are sought from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and issued to the traders. The traders are provided space in a mart where they store their goods and bank facilities at Gunji till the trade concludes in the last week of October. The I.T.B.P. provides them security till they cross over to Tibet from the Lipulekh pass."

Pillar of Tibet Trade:

Huniya Mitra: Sherchhyu-Ngyulchhyu⁵ Barter of grain and salt was prominent base for Indo-Tibet trade. From centuries some rules were established to make healthy friendship between Bhotiya and **Huniya (Tibetan Friend)** people to run the business properly and both the communities followed the rules till 1962. Trading was impossible without establishment of friendly relations. Only, **Nekor** (Tourists come to visit Kailash) of **Jyang-Thang⁶** who use to come with sheep and goats, were not restricted to do business through **Bhotiya/Shauka** people. He was an amazing rule to form friendly relation. In Tibetan language **Sher means gold, Ngyul means silver and Chhyu means water**, water with gold-silver in it, was considered a symbol of holiness. Thus, both the parties use to drink liquor mixed replica of water, touched with ghee⁷, wool, barley, gold and exchange precious items as gifts. This way of eating each other's food is called Sherchhyu-Ngyulchhyu. This tradition can be pursuing by drinking jya⁸. If Shauka friend

⁴ If an Indian trader establishes friendship with head of the village, all the residents of that village becomes business friend of Shauka/Bhotia because of the rights of village head these friends were known as De-Mushye.

⁵ Sher-Gold, Chhyu – Water, Ngyul - Silver

⁶ A place name

⁷ Clarified butter

⁸ Salted tea

does not consume liquor, they used to break a stone into two parts and both the friends keep one part with them as evidence to permanence their friendship⁹. These stone pieces were used as evidence if any dispute occurs. The written agreement of friendship, business and exchanges was called Gamgiya¹⁰.

On violation of Gamgiya, lawbreaker was punished by Chhasyo¹¹. In Indian border or Tibetan friend in Tibet was to offer ten percent gabel of wool as a part of friendship to his Shauka friend while trading¹². However, this profit sharing practice was not statutory recognition but still Shauka people of Johar were taking this profit from their Huniya friends as a tradition¹³. Shauka friend would arrange grain from other Shauka in case of non-availability with him and deserved for 10 % profit from both; Huniya friend and the Shauka person giving grain. Shauka friends deserved for a part of profit at Tibetan girl's in-laws home after her marriage. This led to enhancement of profit sharing rights of Shauka people from Tibetans. These friendly rights would invalid in-case father takes an amount from in-laws for his girl to marry at their home. Tibetans could not do business with anyone else without permission of Shauka friend but Shauka friend could sell his friendly rights with Tibetan friend. Dhanu Burfal had sold "Ghee kilimiya" to Jasmal Burfal etc. for four hundred rupees. Monu Nirkhupa also sold many of his Tibetan friends¹⁴. Tibetan friend was allowed to trade with his friends at Johar, Darma and Garhwal. This friendship was genetic and expansion in families led to distribution of business with Tibetan friends. People from Bud Du, Chuchu, Mirsua, Laad, Dunathyu, Korpan, Salyab and Puradi villages etc, use to visit Shauka regions near border in June and September. But Tibetan friends from Garche, Garge, Syaad Kora, Thokpa, lhabaad and Bheribadbu etc. areas (residents of Jyang-Thang) were visited Ganima and Chakra markets for business. Nekor people would buy only Bisata goods, cloth and jaggery from Shauka traders. Shauka traders use to visit camps of Nekor people to fix the price of wool. There was a unique practice to fix the price i.e. silently, with the finger signals under the long sleeve of paletot (gown). Eating each other's refuses and tie a colorful cloth with tail of cattle was also considered as an agreement of sale-purchase and

⁹ Indra Singh Rawat, *Indian explorers of the nineteenth century*, p. 3

¹⁰ Agreement

¹¹ Before the subdivision officer

¹² Lalit Pant, 'Simtati hui samriddhi', Pahad -2, p. 33

¹³ H.G. Betan, Almora, A Gazetteers, Johari's, 1911, p. 65

¹⁴ Ram Singh Pangti, *Johar ka Itihaas tatha Vanshawali*, p. 72

Tibetan people perceived as their moral duty. The friendship could be sacked by breaking 'Thapka'¹⁵ into two parts, if there are some clashes arise.

*Sog-La-Sog*¹⁶ : Trading of salt, wool and grain was done by barter scheme under set business rules. Rest of the Tibetan goods i.e. skin, gold powder, cattle, cloth, grocery, ornaments, metal utensils and haberdasheries were traded for cash or kind on set prices. Firstly, prices were based on market value and production cost in case of cash transactions and for kind transactions. Secondly, prices were set on higher values, decided by the trader of every party for their products. This type of business called Sog-la-Sog. Prices were kept confidential with the help of silent language signs. Tibetan friends never show distrust behavior to their **Rodba**¹⁷ friends. Tibetan's has an oath custom by putting gun barrel, like in India swearing by putting (The Bhagwad Geeta, The Bible, The Kuran etc. religious scriptures) on head.

*De-Muse*¹⁸: If an Indian trader establishes friendship with head of the village, all the residents of that village becomes business friend of Shauka because of the rights of village head. These friends were known as De-Muse. These friendship rules with Tibetans, caused to some disagreements which were filed Tibetan officers, Indian trade agents and Indian courts in form of dispute. In second decade of twentieth century, once **Korepan**¹⁹ was stopped in Milam and consequently Jang-Pangi people robbed wool from Rawat people in Barfu. The case reached to court and two witnesses; Sonam Lengo and Lhabohog were called and with the efforts of Raibahadur Kishan Singh, both the parties compromised in **Tejam**²⁰. In the Same way month of November Chunni and Angdu of Gartok were called as witness at Pithoragarh tehsil in a case dispute of friendship between Jangpangi and Pangti people. In relation to De-Muse friendship, Dilip Singh Martolia had filed an objection at office of Indian trade agent, Gartok against Mani Burfal, Dev Singh Dhamsaktu and Harnal Singh Ghanghariya. But 1951, Lakhsman Singh Jangpangi- then Indian trade agent, cancelled their objections and declared the De-Muse friendship rule unacceptable on the basis of Tibetan witnesses and review of **Gamgiya**²¹. In context of these friendship issues, a rule was passed by British trade agent, **Gartok** in 1945 that

¹⁵ A rope made out of cow's hair

¹⁶ Barter system

¹⁷ Bhotia or Shauka

¹⁸ One kind of friendship rules between Indian Shauka/Bhotia and Tibetan trader

¹⁹ Tibetan friend of Jangpangi (A place name)

²⁰ Name of a place

²¹ Copy of the decision of an agent of Indian Trade, Gartok, western Tibet, Transcript no. F 8 (1), WT/45, Dated 20-10-51

registration of written **Gamgiya** from British trade agent is mandatory to establish friendship and such friendly sale-purchase related agreements were valid only on government stamp paper. The right of Shauka people to establish friendship with girl's in laws was also declared invalid. The friendly relation of Tibetan friend was considered revert in case he left own village and shifted to a new place permanently, provided names he known the names of family members of friend. A scheme to fine guilty person (Controversies in friendship cases) with rupees hundred was established by British trade agent court in Gartok²².

*Kyeme-Sime*²³: Shauka and Tibetan friends exchanged Indian goods (Jaggery, sugar candies, barley, and snacks) and Tibetan goods (clarified butter, chhirapi²⁴ etc.). Annually as gifts to keep their friendship profound Shauka people were fond of Tibetan sheep and clarified butter made out of the chanwar cow's milk. They bought chanwar cow to give it to Tibetan friend to cradle and also gave 10 rupees as its fixed price. In return, Tibetan friend use to give 32 nya-ga (8 ser²⁵) clarified butter, 10 sinh (10 nali) chipari to Shauka friend annually, which was produced from that chanwar cow. This muddle was valid until Huniya friend return that chanwar cow and 10 rupees but Huniya friends considered this a foible to break up kyeme-sime practice, in Tibetan language the words **kyeme-sime – No birth, no death**. According to that arrangement this cow would neither breed nor die ever, means Tibetan friend will continuously keep on giving clarified butter and chirpi even after the death of chanwar cow and will get not right on the calf of that cow. Chirpi is a dense product made of the cooked cheese (produced from butter) and used for making sweets.



Figure 1: Traders on the way to Tibet from Uttarakhand route with their horses and mules

Figure 2: Myself on the way to trade route

Figure 3: This is the only medium of transportation which is used by traders from ancient period

Figure 4: Garbiyang (The Sinking Village)

²²Johar ke vyapariyon or tibeti mitro ke sambandh mai paschimi Tibet ke gartok stith red agent dwara sansodhit August 1945 ke niyam ki pratilipi

²³Sher Singh Pangti, – 'Pahad -3', p. 32

²⁴Made of cooked cheese

²⁵400 gm approx

Route to Tibet for Trade from Uttarakhand and Nepal in Kilometers:

Lipulekh Route: Garbyang – 12 km – Kalapani – 6 km – Sang-Bung – 3 km – Lipulekh valley – 5 km – Pala – 5 km – Taklakot – 12 km – Yancha – 12 km – Gori Udyar – 12 km – Rakastal – 6 km – Mansarovar – 8 km – Jyu Gompa – 4 km – Baagat – 4 km – Barkha – 4 km – Darchhen Mandi Lipulekh pass in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand. Lipulekh pass connects the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand with the old trading town of Taklakot in Tibet. The pass is first Indian border post to be opened for trade with China in 1992.

Darma Route: Dharchula – 10.5 km – Khela – 9.5 km – Yo – 2 km – Dar – 14 km – Nagling – 12 km – Go – 6 km – Bidang – 11 km – Dabe – 5.5 km – Darma valley – 4 km – Gadyul – 4.25 km – Labha Chhorten – 12 km – Chhakra Mandi – 5 km – Gyanima Mandi

The Panch Chulli peaks lie in Eastern Kumaon Himalaya and form the watershed between the Gori Ganga and Darma Valleys. The eastern approaches are through Sona and Meola Glaciers. The Uttari and Dakshini Balati glaciers guard the western approaches. Nestling snugly in the lap of the snow capped peaks of Panch Chulli, the Darma Valley in remote Pithoragarh district, bordering Nepal and Tibet, is endowed with extraordinary scenic beauty. Between mid-May and end June and from mid-September to end-October the Wayfarer group regularly organizes trekking trips to Punch Chulli Glacier and Darma Valley. The starting point of this adventure is the Wayfarer Mountain Resort at Munsyari from where we drive by jeep for around 95 kms. to the Indo-Nepal border town of Dharchulla. From this town a further drive of 35 kms. along the banks of the Dhaul Ganga river takes us to the village of Sobla. Here onwards it's a 40 km. trail that passes through Dar, Bungling, Sela, Nagling, Baaling and Dukt / Dantu village in the Darma Valley before reaching Punch Chulli Glacier.

Untadhura Route: Lelam – 7.5 km – Bagudiyar – 7 km – Rilkot – 2.25 km – Martauli – 2 km – Burpu – 2.5 km – Bilju – 3 km – Milam – 2.25 km – Dunga – 6.50 km – Bomlas – 3.50 km – Untadhura – 3.75 km – Jayanti dhura – 5 km – Bung rebing righata – 12 km – Chhurchin – 2.25 km – Thajand – 9 km – Guneyang ti – 2.50 km – Darmyang ti – 11.75 km – Gyanima mandi

In May-June, Unta Dhura Pass will be full of deep snow. In August even fully laden khacchars (mules) cross it. The Army uses this pass regularly. Technically you need a permit from Pithoragarh distt., D.M (District Magistrate) as well as Chamoli distt., D.M. before you

crosses the Pass. In actual practice, it would be better to ask someone at Munsiri for the current picture. I have never heard of Indians arrested for "not having permit" but, yes, they have been detained and questioned for two to three days by the Army now and then.

Mana Route Mana – 5 km – Musapaani – 3 km – Ghastoli – 4 km – Chamraav – 5 km – Sarwati – 2 km – Ratakauna – 4 km – Jagraav – 3 km – Mana dhura – 9 km – Vipuk – 11 km – Charang la – 3 km – Ramura – 10 km – Chhankra – 10 km – Rattukhhana – 20 km – Toling math – 38 km – Mang nang – 14 km – Dava.

Mana Pass was an ancient trade route between Uttarakhand and Tibet. Mana Pass led from Badrinath to the kingdom, now province of **Guge in Tibet**. The Portuguese Jesuits **Antonio de Andrade and Manuel Marques** became the first known Europeans to enter Tibet across Mana Pass in 1624. The pass continued as a minor trade route until its closure in 1951 by the Chinese. On April 29, 1954, China and India signed an agreement granting pilgrims and indigenous travelers the right to travel between the two countries through Mana Pass. Mana Pass (elevation 5,608 m or 18,399 ft), alternatively **Māna La, Chirbitya, Chirbitya-la** or **Dungri La**, is a mountain pass in the Himalaya on the border between India and Tibet. It appears to now be one of the highest vehicle-accessible pass in the world, containing a road constructed in the 2005-2010 period for the Indian military by the boarder road organization and visible on 2011 imagery on visual globe systems such as Google Earth. The well-graded gravel-dirt road is higher on the Indian side than the new road on the Tibetan side, and rises to 5,610 metres (18,406 ft) on the Indian side of the border, 250m west of the low point of the 5,608 metres (18,399 ft) Mana Pass.

Conclusion:

It's not quite the Silk Route, but for ages the Passes was used by Indian and Tibetan traders carrying skins, spices and textiles until the 1962 India-China war closed it. To reach the India-Tibet-Nepal trijunction at Lipu Lekh Pass 17,000 ft above sea level, from Dharchula in Pithoragarh district, is a back-breaking - but breathtakingly beautiful - trek that takes a fit person at least 10 days. The 100-km journey threads its way through vertiginous mountains over a narrow track that overlooks gorges many miles deep. Leave aside the creature comforts; even oxygen is thin in the rarefied air along the way. The region is completely cut off during the long winters when temperatures fall below zero and snowdrifts block the valleys and passes. Any trader trying to do business on the Himalayan peaks has to have the physique of a mountaineer

and the spirit of an explorer. But India and China are hoping that their decision to reopen trade on the Tibetan border will ease relations, strained since 1962. Yet, it is not expected to make much of a difference to the existing minuscule bilateral trade: India's 1990-91 imports were Rs 55.6 crore and exports Rs 32.7 crore. The traditional trading communities on both sides do not even have the bare minimum of communication or transport facilities. But as in most diplomatic dealings with China, it is symbolism not substance that is significant.

Accordingly, both the countries flashed a green signal for the trade run immediately after the protocol was signed. India gave short shrift to a spate of objections by the defence forces on tactical grounds in pursuit of the larger diplomatic objective of opening up to China in the run-up to a Festival of China in India later this year. The border region spread over the adjoining districts of Pithoragarh, Almora, Garhwal and Nainital, has had an age-old tradition of trade with Tibet. But the '62 war left only ghost villages in its wake. The residents - mostly of the Ranga tribe who are ethnically close to the Shaukas (Bhutias), the Tibetan-north Indian hybrid - migrated to the plains in search of a livelihood. The Dharchula traders are irked by the requirement to obtain umpteen licences from various ministries. Says Jawahar Singh Nabhiyal, a member of the Indo-Tibetan Trade Committee: ***"If the Government insists on licences, our role will be reduced to subcontracting for big businessmen from the plains."*** Yet the resumption of trade may put the economy of Pithoragarh and adjoining districts back on the rails. The area's cottage industry of woollen carpets and other wool-based products is nearly defunct for want of Tibetan wool. S. Raju, Pithoragarh's district magistrate, is optimistic: ***"In a couple of years you will see people re-establishing their looms."*** But at the ground level, problems are formidable. Transporting merchandise from Dharchula to Taklakot adds Rs 15 per kilo to the cost. The landslide-prone terrain may scare away many traders. In the past three months, a porter and many mules have plunged into the gorges. Clearly, trade is unlikely to flourish without a decent road and telephone links. For the present, the estimates of this year's border trade range between a negligible Rs 20 lakh to Rs 50 lakh. Commerce Ministry officials in Delhi expect the trade to pick up once the teething troubles are over. Says Didar Singh, director (commerce) in the foreign trade section: ***"Lipu Lekh is only the beginning. We would like to open some other traditional trade routes too."*** This would still not swell the small Sino-Indian trade figures. But like ping-pong diplomacy, in dealings with China, small gestures matter a lot. In that respect, the reopening of trade is a major step forward.

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